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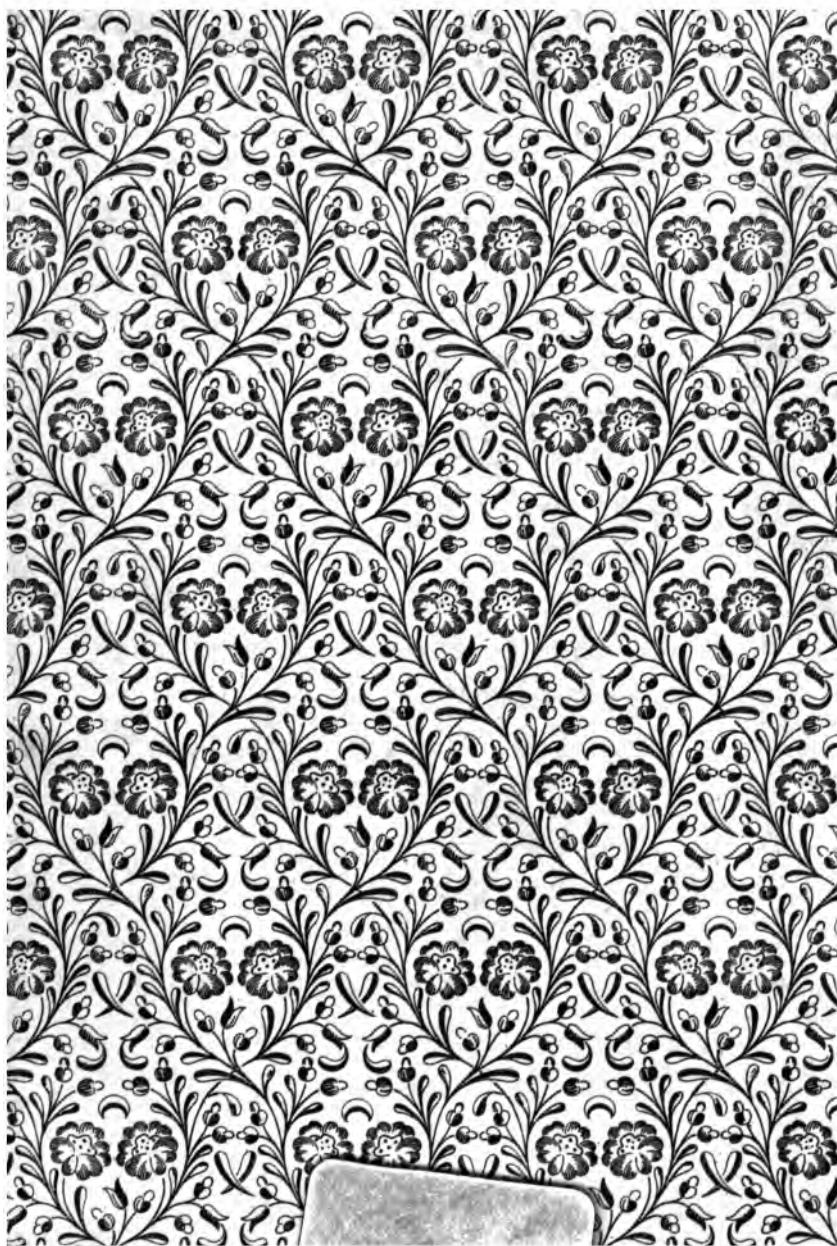
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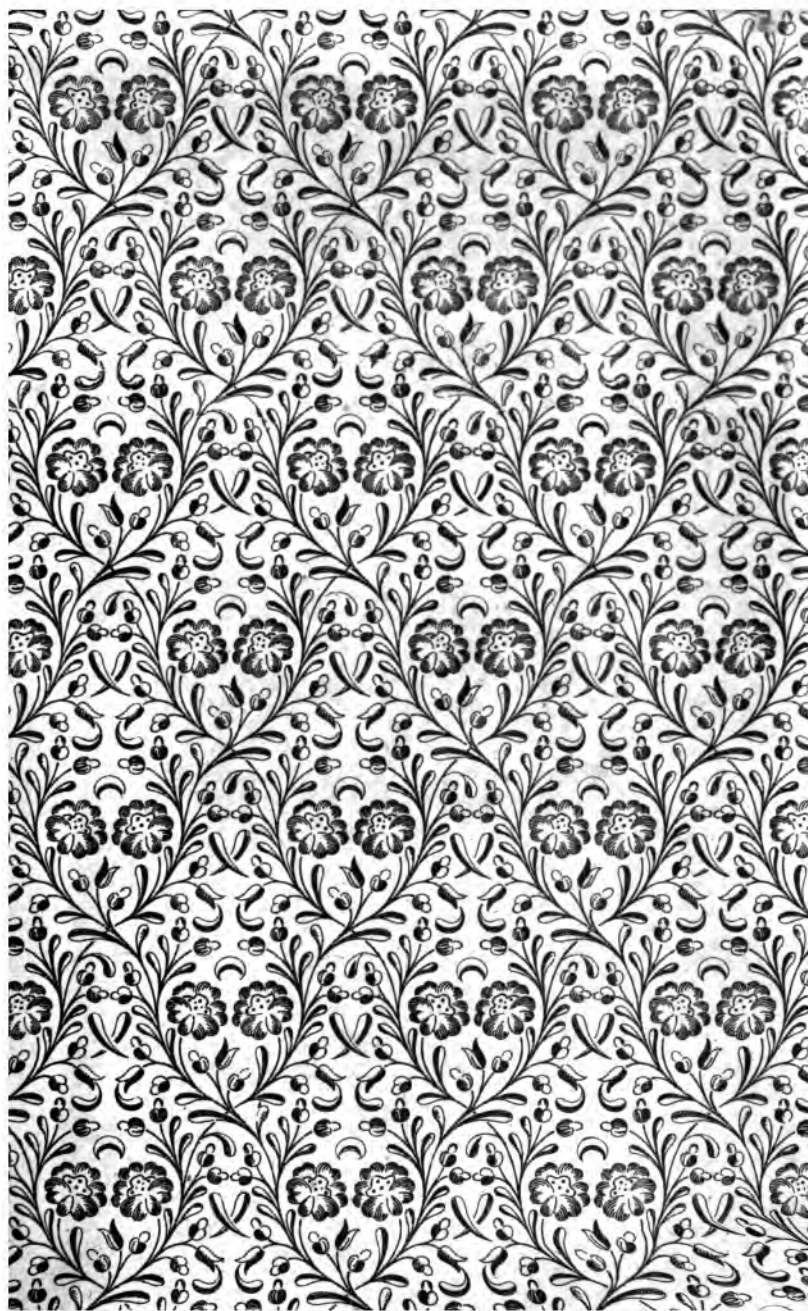
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'Polly laid her hand upon Job's shoulder.'

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AUTHOR OF

'ROBIN GRAY' 'IN HONOUR BOUND' 'WHAT WILL THE WORLD SAY?' ETC.



IN THREE VOLUMES—VOL. II.

London

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'Alas! how easily things go wrong—
A sigh too much, or a kiss too long
And there follows a mist and a weeping rain,
And life is never the same again'

GEORGE MACDONALD

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QUEEN OF THE MEADOW.

CHAPTER XX.

‘IT WAS A FOOL’S BUSINESS.’

THE possibility of the bank collapsing had never been suspected; therefore Michael was the more startled when he learned that its doors had been closed, and hence his hasty journey to London. Even then he did not imagine that any very serious loss would disturb the prosperity of Marshstead and the Meadow; he knew that he could not lose much, and he was only anxious on Polly’s account, for his notions of what interests she had at stake in the bank were of the most vague kind. On that subject Job Hazell had been always curiously reticent; and Michael

was too good a son, and too indifferent about anything which was not freely confided to him, to make inquiries.

His father's exclamation now conveyed to him the impression of a calamity so far beyond anything his wildest anxiety could have suggested, that he was stupefied and for a time unconscious of pain. He sat quite still, his face white, his eyes fixed on the old man opposite; not thinking, but waiting for something to quicken him again into sensibility and reason.

For a little while Job was in the same condition as his son; but he was the first to recover the power of speech. Resting his elbows on the arms of his chair, he bent eagerly forward, and, although his voice did not rise above a whisper, he was evidently trying to speak loudly and firmly.

'Say it again, lad; I can't make it out. My head has got queer somehow, and things are going round, and round, and round—and I can't catch 'em, or fix 'em right. *Did* you say the County Bank is broke?'

Michael nodded : that was all he was able to do ; but the first shock of the blow was almost over, and his mind was beginning to escape from the fog which had enshrouded it.

Job got his handkerchief and wiped the perspiration from his brow. He wished to misunderstand Michael's words : there might be some horrible blunder in it all. He had known of cases in which sound ' concerns ' had been ruined by false rumours. Michael might have been deceived—as thousands of others had been—and perhaps he had mistaken a temporary difficulty for a total collapse.

' You can't be sure of a thing of this sort all at once,' he began to argue piteously, and more with himself than with his son. ' They do make such a fuss when a bank closes its doors. Like enough it will all come right yet.'

' No,' said Michael, rousing himself ; ' I saw Patchett in London. He has been making inquiries and trying to get out money belonging to

some of his clients. He says there will not be a farthing left for anybody.'

Patchett was the village attorney, and Job knew him as one of the sharpest and shrewdest of his profession.

'Oh, Lord! oh, Lord,' he groaned, rocking himself to and fro. 'Poor Polly! she has lost all.'

'But how does that happen?'

'My fault, lad, my fault.'

'Your fault!' And Michael stared in new amazement at his father.

'Ay, mine. I oughtn't to have left all the eggs in one basket, that's certain, and it's common sense. But I couldn't see what was coming—how could I? A fool's business it was from beginning to end, and I ought to have known it in time.'

'I wish you would tell me, dad, how it is that you are to blame for the misfortune.'

'Give me a breath; I can't speak at this

minute—I can't think. Let me be for a while, and I'll tell you all about it.'

Michael did not attempt to question him further : there was in his nature a strong element of that veneration for parental authority which rendered him ready at all times to obey without murmur, and to submit even when he doubted. That is a respect which fathers rarely find nowadays, when the youth always knows so much more and better than his elders.

He went out to the fields, desirous of reflecting on the whole matter in solitude. The terrier, Ted, followed and gambolled around him, barking to attract attention, but he was unheeded. Michael tramped on through the grass, the dew-drops on which glistened in the moonlight like diamonds ; and through the spaces in the trees the light shone like so many great cold eyes glaring upon him. The sky was clear and radiant with many stars and planets ; at his feet frogs croaked and leaped, making splashes in the ditch ;

and at length Ted, finding that he could not please his master, set off on a scamper to amuse himself.

How was he to save her? How was he even to help her? These were the questions he had to face and answer. His love would have supplied him with more than sufficient motive for straining every nerve to protect her from the consequences of this misfortune; but, besides, the self-reproaches uttered by his father—and which he, scarcely half-understanding, interpreted literally—caused him to believe that all they possessed ought to be straightway delivered over to Polly. But he did justice to his father. Let the explanation come when it might, he knew that no intentional wrong had been done by him; therefore Polly herself would be the first to exclaim against the absurdity of such a Quixotic proceeding as he felt disposed to carry out, namely, to go to her and say—‘We have lost your fortune; take ours.’

There was one way in which the difficulty might be overcome—if she would only consent ! But that was not to be thought of at present. Job had told him of the visit to the Meadow, of Walton being sent away, and declared that nothing was wanting to make Polly say ‘yes’ but a little more courage on his part. Michael was vexed by the attempt to force consent from her, and did his best to avoid any sign of awkwardness in her presence. He came and went as before, and she was grateful to him for thus entirely ignoring his father’s indiscreet mission.

The moon sailed out from a long line of cloud mountains. The light was cold and unsympathetic ; the calmness of the hour which had been always so grateful to him, although it soothed his perturbed brain, yet seemed full of sadness. Had she been with him he would have seen beauty everywhere. So nature is sad or glad in accord with our own humours.

The walk and the cool air had done him good.

Gradually the troubled face had become calm, and the excited steps more measured. By the time he turned towards the house he was beginning to see the outline of a definite plan of action. He halted by a low hedge and gazed in the direction of the Meadow Farm. He would have liked to go there, to see her in happiness for one night before she became aware of what had befallen her; to see her smile, to hear her laugh! He turned away, without sighing, but with an eager light in his eyes as he iterated the question he had been putting to himself during the last half-hour:

‘*Must* she know it? Could no way be discovered by which the loss might be hidden from her for ever?’

He made his usual round of the offices to see that all lights were out and everything made secure for the night. Then he entered the house.

The parlour was almost dark, for Job had

forgotten to attend to the lamp, and the wick had burned low. Michael saw him in the dim light still seated where he had left him. The old man's body was bent forward, with elbows resting heavily on his knees ; in one hand a match, in the other his pipe, filled but unlit. He seemed to have paused just as he had been about to apply the light, and to have become oblivious as to what he had intended to do, like one stricken with an epileptic fit. It was a bad sign when Job forgot to light his pipe : it had been for many years the sweet soother of his angry passions when they rose and his comforter in moments or hours of sorrow.

He did not move or speak at the entrance of his son ; and Michael, startled by his silence, instantly turned up the light. Job's eyes blinked, as if pained ; he drew a long breath, and continued the action which had been arrested by one of those fits of abstraction that often seize the troubled mind : he struck the match, and at-

tempted to light his pipe. But the pipe would not draw, somehow, and in the course of the conversation he wasted many matches.

‘You look ill, dad,’ said Michael gently; ‘can I do anything for you?’

‘You can’t expect me to be well after what you have told me,’ was the fretful answer. ‘Go over it all again. That’s the only thing you can do for me. I haven’t got a right hold of the thing yet. Did you say it was a hopeless case?’

‘Quite hopeless. But we had better not talk any more about it to-night. When you have had a rest we shall be better able to think of what we have to do; and besides, we shall have more correct information in the morning than I was able to get to-day.’

‘Tell me again, I say. Do you think I can sleep before I see the best or the worst of it? This I do see—don’t take charge of another man’s affairs. You can suffer your own losses, and only have yourself to blame yourself; but it’s different

when you have got others to blame you as well as yourself. Tell me again.'

Michael was almost as much distressed by the strange mood of his father as by the calamity which had befallen Polly. He repeated all that he knew about the failure of the bank. There had been scarcely a whisper to suggest its insolvency, even a few days ago, in the rural districts where the branch offices had been for a long time doing a thriving business. Only two months previous to the crash a very satisfactory dividend had been declared by the directors.

'What are we to do for her?' was Job's helpless cry.

Then Michael seized the moment to let his heart speak. He had no thought of how far his father was to blame for the misfortune; no heed of what loss might be entailed upon himself: the only thought was to save her from sorrow, and so he said:

'Give up everything we have, dad, if we can

arrange it so that she may never know what we have done. Then she would not suffer, and I—that is, we would be comfortable.’

His face brightened as he made this wild proposal; he felt that he had discovered the right way out of the difficulty. There was no wildness in the proposal as it appeared to his mind: if his father were in any way responsible for her loss, they were bound to make it good. What could be more clear? Then, knowing her spirit, he foresaw that she would refuse to accept this restitution of her lost fortune; therefore he desired it to be made without letting her know that she had run the risk of any loss at all.

The course was not quite so plain to his father’s eyes. Job certainly desired to be comfortable; and he had a conscience which was sufficiently sensitive to make him eager to be at peace with this world and the next, and fervently desirous of steering clear of any act which might afterwards involve self-reproach. At the same

time the experience of years suggests many reasons for delaying the execution of impulsive thoughts, and for evading what in the heyday of life and love would have appeared to be an imperative duty. Michael had the youth and the love which made him ready for any sacrifice ; Job had the age and experience which made him object to the idea of suddenly casting away the store he had gathered up. So he said :

‘I am to blame, as I told you, but it’s only so far as giving in to her father’s notions is concerned. I said it was a fool’s business at the time, and so it has turned out. You needn’t think I did any wrong more nor giving in when I knew I oughtn’t to.’

‘I was sure of that, dad,’ said Michael, relieved, although he had never doubted that his father had acted for the best in whatever he had done. ‘But how does the matter stand?’

‘You see, Holt was pretty well on in years when he got married, and Polly was his only

child. He had always been a queer chap, but he got queerer and queerer after his missus went away—she *was* a fine woman! You maybe don't recollect much of her, but she was a real good woman, and a heap cleverer nor Polly even. Holt got sour; he couldn't understand why the Lord should have fixed such a trouble on him; and although the parson tried hard to convince him that it was all for his good, and that he ought to say humbly, "Thy will be done," he couldn't see it. There was a-many other wives that might have been taken for the good of their men, and with more reason, as it always seemed to him.'

Job paused, and his thoughts seemed to wander away to old times and faces, so that he forgot what he had intended to tell.

'But about the money?' said Michael presently.

'I'm coming to that. Holt got the notion into his head that he wasn't going to live long;

he saw Polly was to grow up the handsome wench she is, and he worried himself day and night as to what was to come of her. She had a goodish bit of money, and that, with herself, he feared, was like as not to fall into the wrong hands when he was out of the way. So one day he says, "We've been friends a long while now, Job, and real brothers, I believe." "True," says I. "Then I mean to show you," says he, "that I can trust you to do for me, when I am gone, what I would do for myself—I want you to be a father to Polly." "I would have been that without asking," says I, "if so be as you are taken off first." "I know that, Job, but there's something more. I have a mighty fancy for your lad Michael, and if the two happen to pull together, I want them to marry. But she mayn't care for him, and she may care for somebody else; now, if the somebody else is a lad you feel that you can trust in, all right; if he isn't, then this is how I mean to square matters. More than half my money is in

the County Bank shares: I mean to make it all over to you——” “What?” says I, thinking he was going wrong in his head. “Wait a minute,” says he; “it’s only to make things safe for her. If she takes Michael or somebody that you believe to be a trusty mate for her, then you will hand it all back; but if you can’t trust the man she marries, you will give it all—all, mind you, to the last penny—to Michael.”’

‘And did you agree?’ cried Michael, astounded by the extraordinary nature of the arrangement.

‘I told him hard enough that it was a fool’s business, and would lead us all into trouble by and by. But he wouldn’t have no. Then I said he ought to hand the money over to Hodsoll, his own wife’s brother. “I won’t trust no lawyers,” he hollered at me, and I thought it would be the end of him there and then. I got him to go to ’torney Hodsoll, though, and you may be certain *he* wasn’t pleased with this way of doing

things. Holt said he would go straight to Patchett; and whether it was that or because he left something to Sarah, Hodsoll consented to do the job. At the same time he made a will for me, and it gives everything back to Polly, no matter what may happen us. That's how it stands as near as I can make it out; but my head's queer to-night.'

He sank back on his chair with a wearied expression.

'And does she know about this cruel arrangement?'

'No more than that she might look for som'at from me.'

Michael was silent for a long time; then, with intense relief, he said quietly:

'Thank heaven, dad, I think we can help Polly.'

CHAPTER XXI.

MARKET-DAY, AND TEA AT THE VICARAGE.

MARKET-DAY in Dunthorpe, and there were greater numbers than usual of country folk patrolling the High Street and gathered in front of the principal inns. Shop-windows had been all cleaned for the occasion and signs washed. The best wares of the various establishments were placed in the most attractive positions; the tradesmen's wives wore their best smiles, and the husbands were bustling about collecting accounts and seeking new custom.

But there was not much business transacted in Dunthorpe that day. The extra influx of people was due to the bank failure, for a considerable proportion of the farmers of the district were per-

sonally involved in the crash, and the others were interested on account of their friends. Even the prices of hay and cattle attracted small attention compared to that which was given to the eager inquiries as to who was bankrupt; who would be able to weather the storm; and who was safe?

There were sad and anxious faces everywhere mingled with those expressing complacent sympathy. There were the safe ones who, congratulating themselves on the prescience which had kept them out of such a scrape, commiserated the losers and hastened away from the market, lest they should be required to help to keep a tottering neighbour on his feet. This was in most cases a prudent selfishness, and those who adopted it argued fairly enough that, as they had families to support, there could be no sense in jumping on board a sinking ship. There were some, however, who accepted the risk and saved a friend from ruin; others went down with those they

tried to save. Then the wise ones who had come off free congratulated themselves, and were extremely sorry for the misfortunes of their neighbours.

The happiest people in the whole town seemed to be the labourers, the shepherds, and the cattle-drovers; the maidens who were out for a holiday, or looking for situations—on which latter object they were clearly much less intent than on enjoying themselves with the favoured swains of the day. Blessed in their lot, and in their lot content—for the moment at any rate—they made merry in the bright sunshine; the rosy cheeks were full of laughter, and the sparkling eyes never saw the sad faces around them. They had no stocks or shares or sick cattle to cloud the holiday, and from them the peripatetic vendors of nuts and ginger-beer derived their custom. By and by the tap-rooms of both inns became crowded; and on the green in front of the 'Grey Goose' an impromptu dance was got up by the merry lads and lasses, a

wandering fiddler having been seized for the occasion, seated on a table, and well supplied with beer as well as coppers. The fun became decidedly rough as the evening closed, and it was nearly midnight before the last sounds of the roysterers' voices were heard in the village. Then home, headaches, and repentance.

Polly and Sarah were together in the market, and from this friend and that they heard mysterious rumours to the effect that Job Hazell was seriously involved by the failure of the bank, that he had taken to his bed, and was not likely to recover from the shock. This was the first market which Job had failed to attend for many years, and his absence gave rise to the most alarming reports of his illness.

Whilst Sarah delivered the eggs and butter she had brought to their regular customers, Polly looked eagerly for Michael, in order to learn how far the rumours were true ; but he did not appear, and the absence of father and son gave

rise to much wonder. She, however, met Eben Tyler, the stout, good-natured holder of the Brook Farm, and he was able to relieve her mind. He had seen old Hazell that morning, and, although he seemed to be rather shaky and not himself, there had not appeared to be anything very seriously the matter with him. As for Michael, he had gone again to London on some business in connection with the bank.

‘It’s a hard thing for them,’ said Tyler warmly, ‘but it cannot be so bad with them as with many others. Hazell was too clever to keep all his eggs in one basket; and even if the worst should happen there are a dozen—and more—of us who would stand by him and Michael to the last. They will suffer, of course, but they will get over the difficulty.’

‘I am glad indeed to hear that,’ said Polly, her cheeks flushing with joy; ‘for the dreadful things I have heard made me think that they were quite ruined, and that Uncle Job would die.’

‘No fear of that. He has Michael beside him, and if anybody can put things straight he will do it. Keep your mind easy on that score; and I’m joyful to learn that you don’t lose much by the bank.’

‘I believe not, thank you.’

Polly was reassured to some extent, and quite relieved from any immediate anxiety about Uncle Job’s health. Still, she thought it well to call on Dr. Humphreys and ask him to pay a visit to Marshstead that afternoon, without saying that she had sent him. She was fortunate in finding the Doctor at home, and he, a kindly, ruddy-faced, white-headed old man, agreed to do as she wished, although, as he laughingly told her, he knew Job Hazell to be the most inveterate sceptic in regard to medical science.

Then she had to meet Sarah, and proceed with her to the Vicarage, where they were to take tea before starting homeward. She would have liked to escape that visit, for she was eager

to get to Marshstead ; but there was the hope of gathering more news at the Vicarage, and she had a sufficient excuse for making her stay short.

There were many vague projects running through her mind as to what she could and ought to do, if Uncle Job's loss should prove to be really serious ; but she saw nothing clearly so far, and she was saying to herself that her wits were wool-gathering to no purpose, when Tom Walton reached her side.

‘I am glad to find you, Miss Holt,’ he said cheerily ; ‘I was sent from the Vicarage to remind you that you are expected to tea.’

‘I was going there,’ she said briskly and quite recalled to herself by this interruption of her dreamy speculations.

Walton was more smartly dressed than usual, and he was smiling as if there were no such thing as misfortune in the world. She could not help thinking of the earnest expression there would have been on Michael's face at a time of so much

trouble to many worthy people and neighbours. The contrast was not favourable to her escort; but he was too full of pleasant recollections of his reception on the previous evening to note any delicate changes in her moods. He chatted away gaily as they walked up the street towards the grocer's shop at which she was to find Sarah, and was contented with very short responses to all the clever things he tried to say.

He was contented with himself, and that was reason enough for being oblivious to the discontent of others. He had made a sacrifice! And the sensation was so novel that he rather liked it. First, he had driven 'the Angel' into the town that day; second, she had asked him to accompany her in the afternoon to tea at the Vicarage, and he had pointblank refused. But presently they had encountered Miss Arnold. He was afraid of the Vicarage, as a place much too good for the likes of him; and he wanted to escape from his sister. Miss Arnold's appearance, however, settled

the matter, and he was obliged to accept the invitation. Then virtue was rewarded. On entering the Vicarage he learned that Polly was expected; that she was late, and that in her anxiety about the affairs of her friends at Marshstead she might have forgotten the appointment; therefore it would be necessary to send some one to seek her. Walton instantly volunteered to be the messenger, and was off before any objection could be made to his proposal.

All things had unexpectedly turned towards his gratification; hence his gaiety and blindness to Polly's very curt answers.

Sarah was waiting for her cousin, and her cheeks flushed slightly as she observed Walton. He was playful, and congratulated her upon looking so well; at which the flush deepened; but her manner was calm as usual. They walked together towards the church, he taking his place between the two girls, merry in thinking that he was still gaining favour in Polly's eyes before

the beginning of that dreadful fortnight of separation. The merriment was heightened by the reflection that Miss Walton would be indignant at his conduct and full of meditations that would make her tea sour.

They turned into a green lane with sweet-smelling hedgerows on either side; the church and the Vicarage were just in front of them.

‘I do feel such an inclination to go to church,’ said Walton, laughing.

‘How uncomfortable the sensation must be, then!’ commented Polly, remembering how rarely he appeared in the family pew.

‘You are forgetting the difference between the inclination to go and going,’ he replied, not in the least disconcerted by her reminder of his backsliding. But it could scarcely be called backsliding, since there had never been any forward progress. ‘If you would have me go, the parson must be there with the marriage service on the tip of his tongue, and we—just as we are

now—must stand before him with the responses ready.’

‘There would be one too many,’ observed Sarah, without lifting her eyes.

‘I didn’t think of that,’ he answered, with a quick side-glance at the hitherto silent lady, whose presence he had almost forgotten.

He was glad that they had reached the Vicarage gate, although a few minutes before he had been sorry to see it so near. Sarah did exercise some influence over him—it was like a jet of cold water playing on the spine, he thought; and he had felt it more frequently since that interview at the ford. But he always tried to forget anything disagreeable, and, as a rule, he succeeded.

They crossed the lawn; from the open window of the drawing-room issued a soft murmur of voices, and when the new-comers entered they were welcomed by Miss Arnold and the Vicar.

Mr. Arnold had been the pastor of the Dun-

thorpe flock for about forty years; he had counted his seventy-fifth birthday, and he was 'not so strong as he used to be'—that was his phrase. He had a fresh complexion, long silky white hair, clean-shaven face, and soft eyes which sparkled with interest in all that concerned his flock, and with delight when he could help them by advice or sympathy, and in a material way so far as his limited means would go. He still took his place in the pulpit on occasions, and the church was always crowded when it became known beforehand that he was to preach. But the principal work of the parish had been for some years past discharged by the curate, Mr. Holroyd.

The Vicar, finding that he could not stand the fatigue of riding about the country as of old, gradually submitted to an arrangement which Miss Arnold had made, namely, to have a few of the parishioners to tea on the afternoon of the market-days. Thus Mr. Arnold was gratified by the feeling that he was still in personal com-

munion with his people, whilst he was saved from the physical exertion he would certainly have made otherwise; for, although one of the mildest and gentlest of men, he was one of the stubbornest in regard to any point of duty.

So the afternoon of the market-day always brought a number of matrons and maids to the Vicarage; few of the other sex attended, and those few were chiefly youths who had other attractions to the place besides the Vicar and tea. In the winter Mr. Arnold was always seated in his arm-chair by the fire, welcoming his visitors with a genial smile and kind words; in summer his chair was placed by the open French window, through which he would often step out to the garden to pluck a flower for some of his young friends, or to have a private conversation with some of the older ones.

Miss Arnold, whose sweet face carried sunlight into the darkest dwellings, had been born soon after her father had obtained the living of Dun-

thorpe, and circumstances had made her the nurse, the governess, and too soon she had to fill the place of her mother to eight sisters and brothers. She was recognised as an 'old maid;' and she only smiled at that most terrible of all the descriptions which can be given of a woman. But her graceful figure, always so simply yet so perfectly dressed, and her beautiful, sympathetic face made her appear still youthful in spite of the glimpses of silver in her hair. She was everybody's confidant, and yet all felt as if her interest were entirely concentrated in each individual. To the younger girls there was a delightful sense of romantic awe, as they regarded the gentle lady; in thinking that she too had been blessed—or curst—with lovers; had even been 'disappointed' and yet survived! But the awe in no way affected their confidential communications.

She presided at the tea-table, and with old-fashioned courtesy filled the cups of the guests with her own hand. The occupation did not at

all interfere with her conversation ; she made no effort to speak, but she had the happy gift of always being able to touch some responsive chord in those around her which set them off gossiping on their own account. She was, in brief, a good listener, a kindly and keen observer of the humours of her friends, and always suggestive in her replies or questions.

The gathering was not such a successful one as usual on this day, for although only a few of those present felt any deep concern regarding the calamities entailed by the bank failure, all deemed themselves bound to look grave and to speak in whispers.

Miss Walton did not help to improve the occasion. Occupying a chair beside the Vicar, she sipped her tea with so much indifference that one might have fancied she had computed the price of it and found it very poor stuff indeed. Then she regarded the farmers' wives and daughters with an air of condescension which

they resented by ignoring her presence. She was in a very disagreeable position—that of a woman who had attempted to play the lady superior and failed. She was equal to the occasion, however; and finding that she was not estimated at her own value, she disdained any further attempt to conciliate the vulgar crowd, and gave her whole attention to the Vicar.

But even he deserted her as soon as Polly appeared. The young Mistress of the Meadow had been one of Mr. Arnold's pets from her childhood, and, in addition, he was at present anxious to learn how far she was involved in the great failure. Consequently he took an early opportunity of stepping out to the lawn with her.

Walton would have liked to follow them, but, with an effort, he made another sacrifice and remained beside Miss Arnold. To her his words were addressed, but his thoughts and eyes followed Polly.

Sarah furtively watched him, and by some

instinct Miss Walton's attention was drawn to her.

'This is abominably slow,' Walton was thinking, whilst he was chatting with Miss Arnold and taking tea—for which he had a contempt—as if he regarded it as the most palatable of all beverages.

By and by the Vicar and Polly returned. Sarah and Miss Walton noted how quickly Tom revived from the languor which had been creeping over him, and for an instant the eyes of the two women met.

It was somewhat slow this tea-meeting at the Vicarage; but Miss Walton, singular to say, was pleased by her entertainment. She had discovered an ally in the enemy's camp! It was a little hard in the presence of half a dozen pert farmers' daughters to find herself instantly deprived of Mr. Arnold's attention when Polly entered. She made a very fair show of yielding her place with grace; but nobody was deceived

by her apparent courtesy, and a few were maliciously jubilant that she should be 'put out.' She made no effort to gain popularity amongst her inferiors—and they laughed at her.

'Since you are going to Marshstead,' the old Vicar said, laying his hand on Polly's shoulder with paternal affection, 'you will say to Mr. Hazell that I shall be over to see him to-morrow. We must hope that he is not seriously ill; but reverses of this kind are not easily borne when one is up in years.'

Polly and Sarah walked back to the village: the ostler of the 'Queen's Head' had been told to send the wagonette to meet them at the grocer's, where all their parcels were to be collected.

Miss Walton preferred to wait at the Vicarage until her brother should drive down for her. There was a twinkle in Tom's eyes as, in taking leave of Miss Arnold, he said he would be back soon.

When the wagonette drew up at the grocer's door Polly was surprised to see Walton, instead of the stableman, holding the reins.

'I am going to Marshstead, and I want you to give me a lift,' he said as he jumped down. 'I must see old Hazell—all his friends ought to call and show him that his losses make no difference in them.'

'But your sister is waiting for you,' exclaimed Polly, not knowing very well what to say to this strange proceeding.

'I have sent a man for her with a message,' was the prompt response, 'and I shall be really obliged if you will give me a seat in your trap. I shall only stay a few minutes with Hazell, and it is an easy walk from his place to the Abbey.'

He had his way: his impetuosity gave her no time to refuse—even if there had been time she would have found it difficult to give a good reason for refusing him the

ordinary civility of a seat when there was plenty of room in the vehicle.

The shopman had put the parcels in their places, and Sarah sprang into the seat behind without waiting for Walton, who stepped forward to assist her.

‘You are accustomed to sit in front, I know,’ he said to Polly; ‘but you will let me drive.’

She was laughing at the quick, decisive way in which he took everything into his own hands—including the reins—asking leave after he had taken possession, and they were off at a smart trot, before she had verbally sanctioned any of his movements. As they passed through the village he exchanged nods with several acquaintances; and Polly felt her cheeks become warm as she noted the expression of surprise on some of the faces, or the smirk which plainly said, ‘Oh, that’s it, is it?’

Half an hour afterwards Miss Walton was being driven homeward by one of the ‘Queen’s

Head' men. She had preserved a perfectly smooth countenance at the Vicarage when informed that her brother had been unexpectedly called away to see a sick friend, and therefore found it necessary to send for her; but on the road her thoughts were not pleasant and her expression was not a pretty one.

CHAPTER XXII.

‘WHAT IS WRONG?’

HAD she done anything wrong? Why was Sarah so horribly silent?

These questions were exercising Polly's intellect severely, and spoiling her humour, whilst Walton chatted away merrily about horses, races, bets and betmakers. She certainly did her best to include Sarah in the conversation; but that lady made little effort in response. ‘Yes,’ ‘No,’ ‘Perhaps,’ ‘I cannot say,’ appeared to comprise her whole vocabulary. At length, with a feeling of some irritation, Polly left this reserved cousin to her own communings, and gave her attention entirely to the latest news about the forthcoming races.

By the time they had got two miles away from the village she felt that it was a mistake to have allowed Walton to accompany her, especially as he assumed the position of one who had taken care of her. Ten minutes afterwards, she felt that it would have been a shame to have refused his request for a seat as far as Marshstead, and was inclined to think that his company was a good set-off against Sarah's sulks.

Arrived at the farm, Michael came out to meet them. His first glance, full of light and pleasure, was directed towards Polly; but all the pleasure seemed to fade from his eyes when he saw Walton with the reins in his hand.]

The change was so marked that Polly observed it at once; and she was now convinced that in some way she had done something wrong. Setting her own feelings aside, however, she made the inquiry :

‘How is Uncle Job?’

‘Very much as usual,’ was the somewhat

cold reply, as he assisted her to descend, and instantly turned to Sarah, who was already helping herself out.

Walton had exchanged a hasty greeting with Michael, and now stood at the horse's head, patting its neck and talking to it in horse-language whilst waiting for someone to take it to the stable.

Polly, sensible of Michael's coldness, stood on the doorstep an instant, hesitating, and glancing alternately at Michael and Sarah, and at Walton. Then she wheeled about and walked into the parlour. Michael's desk was on the table, with a number of papers ranged around it, indicating that the owner had been interrupted in work by the arrival of the party. Job was not there; and Polly was about to leave the room, when there entered a bright-eyed little woman, who, although she had seen her fiftieth birthday, was as active as if she were still in the heyday of youth. This was Jane Darby, who had come to

Marshstead thirty-five years ago, and was regarded as one of the family. She was housekeeper, cook, and general superintendent of everything indoors. She had had 'offers,' but she had chosen to remain Jane Darby. Her years had earned for her the title of 'Missus'; but Job and his son always called her Jane, and those intimate with them followed the example.

'I am glad to see you, Jane,' exclaimed Polly, 'although this is such a sad time that one is almost ashamed to be glad about anything. But where is Uncle Job? Surely he is not so ill as to be in bed?'

'Don't believe he'd stay in bed so long as he could lift one foot past the other—not if all the doctors in the world told him to. Dr. Humphreys was here, and said he wouldn't answer for his life if he didn't keep quiet. "I'll live as long as you," says the master, just laughing at him. "All right," says the Doctor—he is a good man, and never takes anything amiss—"all the same, there

would be no harm in making the most of the strength you've got." "And ain't I doing that?" says master; and then the Doctor and he had a chat together, and it did him a heap of good.'

'But did not the Doctor advise him to take some medicine?'

'Of course!' (with innocent amazement at the idea of a doctor calling and *not* offering medicine). 'But master said he wouldn't take it, and so they parted, the Doctor smiling almost as if he thought master wasn't far wrong. "You will have to take care of yourself, mind," was the last words the Doctor spoke.'

'Then, where is uncle?' said Polly, returning to her original question.

'He's a queer man, miss, as you know,' said Darby, who even in her anxiety could not help smiling. 'As soon as the Doctor went away he took it into his head to go and cut down the hedge at the foot of the garden, because, he said,

it shut out the view of the Meadow way. You can't tell how he thinks about you and Michael, miss; and I believe if anything will ever set him right after the upset he has had, it will be seeing you and Michael settled together; and a finer lad you couldn't find in all the country. I say it, who have known him since he was born.'

'I'll go out and see uncle,' said Polly abruptly.

'That's right,' said the sympathetic Darby; 'the sight of you will do him good. He is always better after you have been here.'

She followed Polly to the door, speaking; and they found one of the men leading the horse away to the stable. Michael, Walton, and Sarah had disappeared.

'They've gone round to the garden,' said the man, guessing at the meaning of Polly's look of astonishment.

He went on to the stable; Darby returned to her household duties; Polly walked hastily

round the corner of the house and towards the foot of the long garden.

The sensation that there was something wrong grew upon her. She had come to try and give comfort to one in distress, and was feeling at this moment that she was very much in want of comfort herself. She had never pretended not to understand that her cousin Michael and Tom Walton were rivals for her favour. She was sorry for that, and still more sorry that circumstances should bring them so much into contact. She had told them both her mind as clearly as she was able to express it; and now she was sure that she was utterly indifferent to them both.

At the same time she felt annoyed with Michael. He must have known the object of her visit, and it was a very palpable slight that he should leave her to find her way to his father when and how she pleased, instead of waiting to accompany her. Then she repeated to herself that disagreeable question—had she done anything

wrong? She could not find any satisfactory answer. She had been civil to Walton, she had been anxious to comfort Michael; and if the first act rendered the second impossible, she was too proud to ask for favour or to press her sympathy on anyone. She felt pained, vexed, and uncertain as to what she ought to do.

When she reached the party she found Sarah seated on a wheelbarrow, smelling a pink rose which had been plucked for her by Michael. The latter was speaking to his father, trying to dissuade him from cutting the hedge any lower, whilst Job worked on, slicing the branches away with vicious energy. Walton was standing under an apple-tree, lighting his pipe.

Polly laid her hand on Job's shoulder, and he turned towards her a haggard face. He smiled when he saw who it was, but the smile only rendered the expression more alarming.

'Oh, uncle,' cried she, grasping his arm, 'you ought not to be out here.'

He put her hand away, but very gently, and, resting upon the long shaft of his hedge-knife, he gazed vacantly in the direction of the Meadow.

'I almost fancy I see it, Polly; and you and Michael will be there together. Only a little bit more on this side, and then we'll have it in full view.'

He was about to resume his work, when Polly, grasping his arm, said softly:

'But you cannot get a view of the Meadow from here, uncle—and besides, I want supper, and I can't take it unless you come with me.'

Job dropped his hedge-knife on the ground, rested his hands on the top of the long shaft, and his chin on them. Then he surveyed the group with slowly dawning intelligence. He nodded to each good-naturedly; chuckled to himself, as if he were quite aware of the absurd ideas they had formed as to his condition. His eyes moved restlessly from one to the other whilst he appeared to speak only to Polly.

‘I know what you mean, Polly. You think I am queer. Well—may be. You young people know so much more than your fathers and mothers that, mayhap, you know more than me. You think it, anyhow, and that’s the same thing. Now, I tell you that, looking over there, I can see the Meadow, plain as ever I saw it from its own gate; and I can see you and Michael there, and the work going on and winning back all that we have lost.’

‘I wish I could see as far as you,’ said Walton: ‘I’d give odds that you would see me a millionaire in no time.’

He spoke with his pipe in his mouth, and his hands were thrust into the side pockets of his coat. He had not the least intention of being impertinent; he was only thinking of the advantage such long vision would be to him in turf matters, and the fortune it would enable him to win.

Job turned his dull eyes upon him, and they

brightened for an instant with a flash of spleen.

‘You’re a pretty lad, Tom Walton, but there ain’t the makings of a millionaire in you—because you see too far.’

‘Is not that a paradox?’

‘Maybe, but it’s plain enough. There are people born who can never succeed, no matter how many fine chances they get—you are one of them. And there are people born who have no chances at all, except what they make for themselves.’

He looked about, as if seeking some representative of the second class; glanced at Michael, who was gravely watching him, and then at Polly, who was evidently distressed by the conversation as well as by the mental weakness apparent in Job. He abruptly completed his sentence:

‘And Sarah is one of *them*.’

The idea of the cold, reserved, and silent girl who was sitting on the wheelbarrow being one of

the gifted individuals capable of commanding circumstances made even Michael smile. Walton laughed outright. Polly spoke :

‘I believe you are right, uncle. Sarah is very quiet, but I don’t think there is anybody who can match her for making everything turn right. You should see her when the girls say they can’t get any butter! She just looks at the churns, and we have more butter than usual. Then as for eggs, where I find one she will discover a dozen after me.’

Polly was as delighted to sing her cousin’s praises as she was anxious to divert the mind of Uncle Job from unpleasant thoughts; but she was interrupted by Sarah.

‘I think you have made me vain enough for one evening,’ she said, lifting her dark eyes and smiling sadly; ‘I wish I could think half as well of myself as you want to make me believe you do.’

‘I hate make-believes,’ said Job emphatically, as he turned again to the hedge.

But the stroke was feeble, and Michael took his arm.

'We'll go in to supper, dad; you can finish that in the morning.'

'It ain't supper-time yet.'

'I told Jane to get it at once, as Mr. Walton has to leave us early.'

'Well, give him his supper and let him go.'

'But we are all hungry, and it will be pleasanter to sit down together.'

'Maybe it would, and I do feel a bit peckish, though I'm not tired. Here, Polly, give me your arm.'

Polly's giving him her arm meant that he should rest on hers. Michael was about to help him on the other side, when Sarah stepped between.

'Let me do it,' she said softly. She had a particular dislike to be left to walk beside Walton.

The rivals were thus made companions for the distance between the hedge and the house; and although a similar thought was uppermost in both minds, neither referred to Polly. 'What are the odds against me now?' Walton was asking himself. 'Can she care for him?' was Michael's reflection. 'Would he still follow if he knew——?'

Job walked slowly with the two girls as his crutches. Polly was amazed by the gaiety of his manner. Knowing him as a man who was particular about pennies—she did not like to say even to herself that he was somewhat greedy—she began to think that surely there must have been some mistake regarding the extent of his losses; for, if they had been of much account, he would certainly have referred to them. There was, to be sure, a curious change in his manner which she could not understand; and she observed with a little pain that he would talk of nothing but her marriage with Michael. To him the

event appeared to be inevitable, and was to be celebrated very soon now.

'But they *do* keep putting it off so,' he complained irritably to Sarah. 'However, we'll just make them settle the affair soon now. Eh, won't we?'

'I hope so,' answered Sarah, with the only sign of gaiety she had yet displayed.

Polly turned away her head, pretending not to hear; but he shook her arm to attract attention and, chuckling, continued:

'Don't be shy, Polly. It must be, and soon. I can't hold out much longer, and you won't send me away without letting me see the thing I most want to see, and that's your wedding. I've been and told the tailor to make a new coat for me for the occasion, and I won't have it put off any longer.'

The fact that the new coat had been ordered appeared to Job to render further postponement of the marriage impossible. He gloated over this

triumph of his ingenuity. She would have gone on shilly-shallying, maybe, for ever so long; and Michael was such an ass that he would have yielded to all her whims—but that new coat definitely settled the whole question.

Polly endured all this with remarkable patience; and her good-nature was tested all the more severely because Sarah agreed with everything that Job said, and went so far in her approval of his suggestions that for an instant Polly thought she was making fun of him. A second glance at Sarah's face satisfied her that she was quite in earnest. She not only supported Job in his querulous insistence that the marriage should take place at once, but she hinted that it was Polly's duty to yield to an arrangement which her father had desired, and which Michael and his father were anxious to carry into effect. 'I must be a most dreadfully perverse creature,' said Polly, with a slight laugh, which was by no means so clear and merry as she could

have wished it to be. 'Every girl is supposed to be in misery until she has a chance of getting married, and here am I with my two dearest friends insisting upon my marrying a man who I feel sure would make the kindest and truest of husbands, and yet I can't say that I will be good and do as I am told.'

This light way of treating the matter was unpleasant to her guardian; and to Sarah it suggested many disturbing thoughts.

'Of course it is a matter in which you have the best right to judge, according to your own feelings,' she said; 'but you should think of others as well as yourself.'

'I am trying to do that,' was Polly's quiet answer.

'Sensibly spoke, Polly, and we'll have the wedding as soon as you can get ready,' said Job, utterly unconscious of the altered tone which the cousins used in addressing each other.

Polly felt annoyed that Sarah should take

part against her : she might at any rate have tried to say a word in her behalf, instead of taking up the same note as Job and insisting on the marriage. It was like a combination to persecute her, and she resented anything like an attempt to force her will. The persistent worry was becoming too much for her, and she felt that she could almost agree to marry anybody in order to escape from it. She maintained silence, however, being anxious to spare her guardian any annoyance which could be avoided in the mean while.

Job mistook her silence for acquiescence, and he relished his supper. He ate heartily, whilst he made sly allusions to great events that were soon to happen, nodding to Polly and winking to Sarah, as if he would say, 'You and I understand.'

Walton, too, was merry. He had apparently quite forgotten that he had only intended to remain a few minutes at Marshstead ; and after supper he offered to play a game at draughts with

Job. The latter looked at him with pleased surprise.

'You've heard that I play?' he said, flattered at this proof of his skill being talked about.

'Oh yes, often, and I know you are a good hand at it; but don't despise me altogether—I have beaten several London fellows who were counted first-rate players.'

, 'I only play a penny a game,' exclaimed Job, with a shade of alarm.

'So much the better for me,' was the reply; 'I would be glad to play for love.'

'Aha! thank you; there are only two who can play for that here.'

Job chuckled at his little joke; and by the time he had won three games and pocketed three pennies he had almost forgotten his dislike of Walton, and was coming to regard him as a very pleasant companion.

Polly in her ill-humour was becoming suspicious. She suspected that Walton delayed in

order that he might claim the right to see her home. So, whilst he was in the middle of another game, she quietly slipped out and told Jane Darby to get the wagonette ready. When she rose to say good-night Walton was taken by surprise.

‘Allow me to see you home,’ he said awkwardly.

‘Thank you, it is not late, and we are driving,’ was the cold answer. ‘Besides, you have not finished your game, and I would not have uncle disappointed on any account.’

He was compelled to say good-bye, and to resume his seat opposite Job, whilst Michael went out to see them off.

‘That’s a point for him to score,’ thought Walton, as, with pretended contentment, he proceeded with the game. What he suffered he believed no tongue could tell, and, brooding over his wrongs, he became reckless of his play and Job the more ecstatic as he found how easily he

could beat this man who had beaten great London players. The country-people have a way of affecting to despise the metropolis and to be horrified at its wickedness, but they calculate their successes by what is done in London.

Michael would have been pleased to avail himself of the unexpected opportunity to be Polly's escort home. But she resolutely declined all escort—so resolutely, that he understood there was no use in repeating his offer. There was something in her manner which in another woman he would have called rudeness, but which in her he attributed to some temporary source of annoyance.

'Very well, I shall be over to see you to-morrow.'

'So much the better—I want to speak to you,' she answered, as she drove away.

Throughout the evening his manner had been very ungracious to her. She knew that he had been observing her closely, and with an air of pity

that made her feel more angry than the expression of any other sentiment on his part could have done. Job made matters worse by his persistent reference to the marriage which in his eyes was inevitable and just about to take place; and Sarah's treachery in joining the cry was almost more than she could bear.

She took the reins with a firm grasp, and her lips were tightly closed: she would let them all know that her wishes had to be consulted before the question as to a husband could be settled. She felt vicious, and yet ready to cry. She had been anxious to offer comfort where she believed there had been distress; she found few signs of discomfort, and she had been subjected to a degree of persecution which caused her for the moment to think again that she would gladly marry anybody in order to escape from its repetition.

CHAPTER XXIII.

GATHERING EGGS.

SOUND sleep is an excellent antidote for ill-humour ; and if the sleep be followed by active exercise in the fresh air of a bright summer morning, it is a pitiful and a sickly nature which does not forget the evils of a previous day and rejoice in the pleasures of the present. A soft south wind, just strong enough to send a delicate ripple over the heads of the ripening grain, and yet brisk enough to make the cheeks glow with signs of healthy circulation, a clear-blue sky, a laughing chorus of birds, the lowing of cattle, the barking of dogs, the crowing of cocks, and the voices of ploughmen speaking to their teams, fill the atmosphere with exquisite sensations of life.

The heart beats lightly, the feet are jubilant, and there is a delicious sense of pleasure throughout the whole system.

Polly had slept soundly; she was therefore in a condition to enjoy the morning on going out to see the people set to work and to give Carter his instructions for the first part of the day. The haymaking was nearly over, but there were many matters to think about and arrange for, besides the live stock which is a constant care. There were still all the important duties of working fallows, of sowing turnips, of carting and spreading lime to be attended to. Then harvest was approaching, and there were many preparations necessary for it: the condition of the reaping machines and the rickyards had to be seen to, the arrangements about extra labourers had to be made, and the resident hands had to be set to work drawing straw for thatching, repairing here and renewing there; and so there was little time to spare for mere amusement.

Polly entered into all the business arrangements of the farm with the earnestness of one who delights in the work. The work was not labour but pleasure to her. At the same time, she was glad to see a few days of comparative leisure before her in which she could be idle without feeling that she was neglecting some duty.

So, on her way back to the house, as was her custom when she had time to spare before breakfast, she helped Sarah by looking for stray eggs. She peered under the hedges and into all the odd corners where she knew some of the perversely secretive hens were in the habit of trying to hide their eggs. Generally she was rewarded by getting her pockets and hands filled; but this morning she was very unsuccessful. However, she was determined not to be disappointed, and knowing that there were several favourite nests on the top of the straw in the barn she turned in that direction.

Although she scarcely owned it to herself, she

was glad to have a little leisure to think about herself and other people. Of course the other people were chiefly Michael and Walton. One circumstance weighed very much in favour of the latter—he had made no allusion to her uncere-
monious return of his present. She never suspected that his silence was due to his normal dislike to allow anything to interfere with the pleasure of the moment. She had appeared glad to see him when he came; he was glad to be with her, and therefore he had no desire to disturb this agreeable state of affairs by seeking explanations which could not be of importance and might be productive of some harm.

A loud cackle, cackle, boding good fortune, greeted her as she entered the barn. When she began to climb the straw, which rose to within three feet of the roof, a couple of hens flew out with a cry equivalent to a scream, but when they got outside they resumed the proud cackle of hens who feel they have done their duty.

Climbing a hill of straw is not such an easy business as ignorant persons would imagine ; feet and hands slip in the most unaccountable way, and even Polly, with all her experience in such exercise, occasionally slid downward three paces for one she had made upward. But that was only fun, and when she did gain the top she saw through the artificial twilight of the place two nests with a fair store of eggs in each. She took off her hat, and after gathering the white and yellow treasures into it, she turned to make her descent. She partly stepped and partly glided ; then just as she was near the floor she slipped, lost her hold of the straw, and went down much more rapidly than she had intended ; but she held up the hat with the eggs and so kept them safe.

The awkward position in which she landed would have afforded much amusement to herself if she had been the sole observer of it ; but she felt something like dismay when she saw Michael Hazell standing in the doorway. The sensation

of chagrin was very brief; she had too much common-sense to allow it to continue. There was an extra tinge of crimson on her cheeks, that was all. She sprang to her feet laughing merrily.

‘I wish you had not come just now, Michael; it is so ridiculous to see a woman tumbling down from a pile of straw.’

‘You can never appear ridiculous to me, Polly.’

‘Why, that is almost as pretty a compliment as your friend Walton would have paid me,’ she said, still laughing, and reckless in her desire to make him feel that she was perfectly at ease.

There had been light and passion in his eyes, but her answer suddenly transformed him into the thoughtful person who had vexed her the previous evening.

She noticed the change, and was aware of the cause: she had spoken of Walton. Well, why should she not speak of him? He was clever, good-looking, and certainly much more desirous

of making himself agreeable than *some* people she knew. That was her pride which gave birth to these thoughts, and her better self was ashamed of them.

She took a very bold step, and one which might lead her into many difficulties. She spoke her mind, tenderly, as to one who had a place in her affections, but still with a pathetic firmness, showing that she reserved her own right to decide the future.

‘What is it that has come between us, Michael? I feel that you are not what you used to be to me, and you force me to say things which I do not mean—at any rate, you make me say things which I see are not pleasing to you, and yet you will not explain why you are so cold and so—I cannot put it in any other way than this—that you are so discontented with me.’

‘Is it of any consequence whether I am discontented or not?’

That was a mistake on his part, but he

could not help it ; Walton was so constantly on her lips, and therefore must be in her thoughts. He was surprised by the reply.

‘ Yes, it is of consequence. We are no longer able to speak to each other as we used to do, and that pains me. You and your father have always been very dear to me. You are in trouble now, and you shut me out from your confidence in a way that makes me feel you no longer regard me as your sister. I have thought sometimes lately that you scarcely regard me as a friend.’

‘ Oh, Polly, you know quite well——’

He stopped. He rested his elbow on the bar of a chaff-cutting machine while his eyes went hunting after something in every direction except that of her face. If he had only looked there he would have seen bright eyes and flushed cheeks which would have given him comfort if they could not have given him satisfaction.

‘ You know,’ he went on, with an effort to

maintain a quiet business-like manner, although the tenderness of his voice betrayed much more than he suspected,—‘you know that you are more than a sister to me, and that you are as dear to my father as any of his own children.’

‘That is why I complain, Michael. If I am as dear to you both as you say, why do you shut me out from your confidence?’

‘If, Polly?’

‘Well, last night neither you nor Uncle Job said a word to me about what was in everybody’s mouth at the market—about your losses, that some said you could never get over.’

‘We have had losses,’ he said gravely, ‘but I believe we can pull through, and our harvest promises to be a good one.’

‘Then, why did you not speak?’

‘We could not very well do that in the presence of—others.’

‘I know what you mean; because Mr. Walton was with me. Well, surely if a friend asks me to

give him a lift when he is going to the same place as myself, I may do so.'

'Of course.' (This somewhat coldly.)

'That was the case last night. Mr. Walton was anxious to offer sympathy and to show his friendship, and because he happened to take the earliest opportunity that offered of going to Marshstead, you were unkind to him and unkind to me.'

'I could not be unkind to you, and I would not be unkind to any friend of yours if I could help it; but I cannot pretend to be grateful for pretended sympathy—a sympathy assumed to serve his own purpose.'

'Oh, Michael, I never heard you speak so distrustfully of anyone before, and I dislike it all the more because I know it is not just to him.'

'Then you prefer to believe in him and to distrust me?'

'You know that I do not prefer anything of the sort; but I will not hear a friend abused

behind his back without saying it is not fair.'

'That means he is your friend and I am unfair! I envy him. I am sorry to find myself out to be a backbiter. I beg your pardon and his; but I was only trying to explain why nothing was said last night, and certainly I did not intend to say anything unpleasant about your—about Mr. Walton. Besides, you must have seen how strange my father has become, and the Doctor left a note warning me that I was to speak of nothing which might disturb him at present. He does not know yet the whole extent of our loss.'

'Then is it very heavy?' she asked with an anxious expression; 'and will you not allow me to help you?'

Now was the time to plead his cause, and he knew it. He ought to have reminded her of the one way by which the difficulty could be most speedily removed and he and his father made happy. He ought to have said, 'Marry me, and

all will be well.' But he would not take advantage of the position; he would always feel afterwards that she yielded to him out of pity, not love. That she did not love him at present in the way a woman ought to love the man she married was clear, at least to his eyes. Her firm defence of Walton was proof enough of that. The defence, too, hurt him in itself. Although a strong and honest-minded man, who would have given place calmly to a worthy rival, he could not do so in the present case.

If he should speak the words which were trembling on his lips, and if it should be, as it seemed, that her affection leaned most towards Walton, she would by and by blame him for concealing the truth and taking advantage of her anxiety to assist him in a time of trouble. So, unwisely, he did not speak the truth, because of his extreme desire that she should be free to choose her mate, and because of his equally extreme desire that she should make her choice

before she learned anything about the sacrifice he was making on her account.

And yet the tenderness in her eyes and voice and look tempted him terribly.

‘Thank you, Polly,’ he said softly; ‘we shall be glad of your help, and I shall tell you when it is needed; but we scarcely know ourselves yet how far we are involved. A few weeks will make that known to us, and then I may ask you to come to the rescue.’

‘I will give up everything—for Uncle Job’s sake,’ she said warmly.

‘And for my sake?’

‘Oh, of course, I count you in with him.’

That settled whatever lingering doubt he might have had, and he went away without speaking the truth.

CHAPTER XXIV.

ON THE BALANCE.

ONE of the drollest problems of human nature, and one for which our philosophy has not yet been able to find a satisfactory solution, is the facility for 'falling out' so frequently displayed by two friends whilst each feels and professes perfect confidence in the other, and is eager to render full justice, even at the cost of personal sacrifice. That was the position of Michael and Polly.

His aim was to be kind to her; her aim was to be kind to him. He wanted to protect her from every anxiety that all his means and skill could turn aside. She wished to comfort and help him; to make him feel that she so far iden-

tified herself with his father and with him that she regarded their losses as part of her own. If Michael had only yielded to the impulse he had discarded as selfish, and spoken out, who can tell what might have happened? Very likely she would have said 'Yes,' but the consent given with hesitation was what he could not accept under the circumstances. No, she must give herself to him with her whole heart, and freely, or not at all.

She was conscious of having been so nearly ready to yield anything he might ask, that she now felt irritated that he had asked nothing and had afforded her no opportunity of proving how earnest was her desire to be useful. He knew that she was not satisfied with him, and he was very far from being satisfied with himself. A few words might have set them right, but the words were not spoken, and two people who were equally desirous to be good friends parted very much like enemies.

‘He is unbearable,’ was her thought as she entered the house, and with impatient haste opened her desk determined to write and tell him her mind, or a bit of it at any rate.

Amongst the papers she saw the rosebud which he had flung from him on the day of their conversation in that room where he had first attempted to explain himself. It was a brown, shrivelled, withered-looking thing, although still retaining its perfume. She snatched it up as if about to throw it out at the window, just as she had done before, but she changed her mind and laid it down carefully in a corner as if it had been some precious sign of a dear memory. On the former occasion she had flung it into her desk as if half-ashamed of her own sentimentality; now there was a shade of sadness in her manner; the rosebud had acquired new meaning since it had been lying shut up in the desk.

She began the letter, not quite so savagely as

she had intended ; she even hesitated over the first sentence, but as she recalled the manner in which he had prevaricated and avoided the confidence she sought, as if she had been a mere acquaintance who wished to pry into his affairs out of vulgar curiosity, she wrote with the velocity of indignation. Time seemed to be too short for her to say all that was in her mind. She plainly told him that his conduct was cruel, or she had placed far too high an estimate on the friendly relationship which she had always supposed to exist between them. If he had not told her that the Doctor had forbidden all conversation on the subject with Uncle Job, she would have gone to him and discovered all the details of the business. As it was, she was shut out from their confidence ; she knew that there was something wrong, and she had to endure all the pain and suspense of brooding over evils which might be less but could not be greater than in her present uncertainty imagination conjured up. She

repeated that it was cruel to her and she had not deserved such treatment.

She signed her name with a grand flourish, but did not prefix it with any courteous phrase, not even the meaningless 'Yours truly.' She did not pause to consider how much more was implied in the omission than in the commission of any of the conventional phrases. She addressed the envelope—so firmly!—and placed the letter in it. Then—she sat with her elbows resting on the desk; her fore-fingers forming pivots for the opposite corners of the letter, on which, by a touch of her little finger, she caused it to revolve. The flush had gone from her face, and she sat for a long time dreamily engaged in this droll occupation of twirling the letter between her hands.

Suddenly she tore the paper in two, and with vigorous haste began to shred it into small fragments. She was anxious to get it disposed of before Sarah entered the room. She gathered

up the fragments, and rolled them into a ball, and they grew into a kind of paper Frankenstein. She did not know how to get rid of them; there was no fire, and she would have made a mess if she had used a match to set them a-light, which would have had to be explained to Sarah. She went into the kitchen, feeling very shame-faced as she invented messages for the two maidens in order to get them out of the way. As soon as they had gone she thrust the ball of torn paper into the fire, and pressed it well in amongst the blazing coals. If she had been burning a will she could not have felt more guilty.

‘What possesses you, Polly, to poke the fire in that way? Don’t you see you are spoiling it?’

It was Sarah who spoke in much amazement at her cousin’s conduct, for it was a very unusual occurrence to see Polly disturbing a good kitchen fire in the middle of summer.

‘It is not the fire, Sarah,’ she answered, her face reflecting the glare of the red-hot coal.

‘What is it, then?’

‘I wrote an angry letter to one who did not deserve it. I luckily changed my mind about it in time, and I am trying to burn it out of existence and out of my memory.’

With that she gave the fire one last vigorous stir, and left the kitchen. Sarah’s lips trembled a little as she gazed after her; of course the angry letter was to Walton, and it was about his going away. He did not deserve it! How she must love him!

This thing that he was doing, Michael believed to be right; it was a restitution, not a sacrifice. He was convinced that if the case had been presented in a court of law, the court would have decided exactly as he had done. Therefore, he argued, he saved a great deal of expense to both parties, and spared Polly many uncomfortable hours. Of course, she never would have thought of going to law, and consequently he was

the more bound to see that she lost nothing. On these accounts he congratulated himself on performing an act of justice in the simplest and quickest manner possible.

Would he have done the same if it had been anyone but Polly who was involved? The question pulled him up sharply. After unpleasant reflections, he would not deny that he *might* have been mean enough to shirk the responsibility of his present action if it had not been Polly who was concerned, but he hoped—he believed—that he would have done as he was doing now. Very likely she would some day learn the truth, and may be, scold him. But she would have to own, at any rate, that he had left her free to make choice of a husband without being influenced by any thought of changed fortunes. She must own it, and she would understand. That was his strong point. How far the element of vanity inspired this faith he could not have told even if he had thought of it. All he knew was that

according to his lights he was doing the best he could for her. If he could help it she should never know anything about what he had done—not even if she gave herself to Walton.

That she might do so, he thought not only possible but probable. Should the probability be realized, he would try to wish them good fortune, and to pass on his own way with as light a step as he might be enabled to use by the consciousness of having always thought of her happiness before his own. Yet amongst all these generous resolves, his heart was sore. He wished that he could avoid her altogether; then he might be more at ease; he might even acquire power over his own emotions. But there were so many things in which his aid was required that they were constantly brought together. Their quarrels were like those of brother and sister, of no permanent importance; and after one of them, they met again as if nothing had happened. Would it be so now?

As for Walton, he had been in the height of felicity on the afternoon of the market-day; and during the drive to Marshstead he would have given freely a hundred to one against the chances of Michael's success. During the evening, however, his opinion regarding the state of affairs became considerably modified; at the end he would not have been inclined to offer more than two to one on the event.

He glided rapidly from the position of a gay wooer who is so confident of success that he is ready to encounter all rivals into that of one who feels himself rather badly used. Under the influence of this agreeable sensation his own value became much enhanced, and Polly's treatment of him appeared to be unkind, if not positively ungrateful.

Had he not on her account braved the combined wrath of the 'Sistern'? Had he not—almost—made up his mind to forswear horse-racing, betting, and all the other joys of his

youth for her sake? And yet she treated him as if he had done nothing to prove how very much he was in love with her. Indeed, she had 'chaffed' him to a greater extent than he would have permitted anyone else to do. Well, he could resent this treatment and give up the chase as if he had never meant anything more than a commonplace flirtation. But then there were those interviews with his family when he had too recklessly declared his readiness to marry the Mistress of the Meadow if she would accept him.

'No, that won't do, either,' was his instant reflection; 'I can't give her up now and be laughed at by the Angel and everybody else. . . . I ought to settle it, though, one way or other before I leave. I go, and the field is entirely open to Hazell. There is no saying what run of luck he may have in my absence.'

He might stay at home. The promise to go which he had given to his sister did not affect his decision on that point at all; he would have

broken it without the slightest pricking of conscience. But a place had been reserved for him on the drag with which Sir Montague Lewis was to convey his young sporting friends to the races, and he could not make up his mind to lose the fun—not to mention that he had bets at stake which would keep him in a burning state of anxiety as to results. On the other hand, if by giving this advantage to the enemy he should lose Polly, he felt that the triumph which Miss Walton would find endless ways of showing—to say nothing of the commiseration and satisfaction of Misses Alice and Carry—would prove too much for him.

‘But I’ll take my chance and go,’ he said, with the air of a man who has resolved upon some noble act of self-sacrifice; ‘I can square matters when I come back.’

Why he should be better able to square matters on his return than before going he did not know. He never bothered himself with such

details as 'reasons' for doing the thing which pleased him most at the moment. Amongst his sisters he affected to be making a great sacrifice of his own inclinations and convenience in order to please them.

Miss Walton was very complaisant because she had gained a fortnight—at least—in which to consider what ought to be done in order to rescue her dear brother from his infatuation. Alice was supercilious; she had not the slightest doubt that Tom was going away in order to gratify himself. But Carry was romantically inclined to regard her brother as a hero who had devoted himself in a spirit of pure self-sacrifice to the performance of some desperate enterprise, and she searched her short memory for some parallel to his conduct in that of the heroes of the last novels she had read. There was nothing equal to him, and she, magnifying the imaginary sacrifice he was making, began to pity him and to look upon her eldest sister as too exacting and too

callous to the finer emotions. Why should he not marry Polly Holt? He might do worse, and very likely would.

Her cheeks were warmed slightly by the self-consciousness that she was interested in the question; for her name had been coupled with that of Michael Hazell on several occasions. He was a very nice young man; and although he had lately met with misfortune he could still offer a comfortable home to his future wife; and if he asked, she did not think that she could say, 'No.' Carry's sentiments were not deep, however, and the asking or the not asking would never unsettle her appetite. She could read and dream of true love crossed in all sorts of absurd ways, and find satisfaction in the pleasant knowledge that at any rate she had never been tried as these poor heroines had been. If she ever should come to suffer like them—well, she would act quite differently. She would not mope, and starve, and make herself miserable as a governess.

She would marry the first sensible man that offered himself. If no sensible man appeared, she would go and do something in the way of work. What that something might be she did not trouble herself to find out ; but took up her novel and became oblivious for the time to everything else.

Walton really did put himself under penance for once in a way ; but it was his injured pride which enabled him to endure. During the two days which intervened between his last meeting with Polly and his departure, he did not call at the Meadow. If she did not care for him he would not care for her ; and yet he longed to say good-bye. Who could tell but this brief parting might be productive of results fatal to his suit ? Those two days were the most uncomfortable that he had ever spent. He was not exactly unhappy, for he had his dogs and his horses to amuse him ; and his sisters, although in their different ways frequently very annoying to him, afforded some

excitement to break the monotony of his existence. And there was the gratification of proving to Polly that he could do without her—for his vanity was great enough to interpret many little acts of ordinary courtesy into marks of special favour, and he believed she would feel hurt by his present reticence.

Still, he was uncomfortable. Now, he would go to her and have his doom pronounced at once, so that there might be no more hunting after a shadow; and presently, he would not risk putting his fate to the proof so suddenly. Three or four times each day he found himself half-way to the Meadow, and turned back in a high state of irritability at these signs of weakness.

‘I am an ass,’ was the only definite conclusion he could arrive at.

It did occur to Polly, two or three times, as a peculiar circumstance, that Walton did not make his appearance before going away. He would have been chagrined to know that she felt very

much obliged to him for his absence. She was worried by the persistent chase after her, and she wanted time to rest and to think. She was in the most unhappy of all positions, that of not knowing her own mind, and she was eager to get out of it as soon as possible. The rosebud in the desk had almost settled the whole question for her; but she had put it away and turned to business with unusual energy in order to keep her nerves steady and her head clear.

The morning of the start from Elizabeth House for Newmarket was dull and foggy. The sky was darkened by many clouds through which flashed fitful gleams of sunshine, but they gave little promise of a fine day. Fair or foul, however, the party was to start, and punctually at half-past nine the drag with its team of four splendid bays, was brought to the gates. Walton and half-a-dozen other young fellows, sons of neighbouring proprietors and of London barristers or doctors, had breakfasted with the baronet and

were ready to leap into the places which they had been invited to take. Sir Montague professed to be a first-class whip himself, and he believed his companions were almost equal to him ; but on all these occasions he insisted upon having his own coachman to drive, as it left the party quite free to enjoy themselves.

He took his place in front, and they started amidst a steady drizzling rain and the cheers of a crowd of village children who had gathered to see the start. Walton was the gayest of all, in spite of the rain.

CHAPTER XXV.

BEGINNING HARVEST.

WHEN Walton had gone away without making any sign, Michael remained the same calm, faithful friend as ever, but an unconfiding one as Polly thought. For the first time in her life she became conscious of a sense of dulness in the routine of her duties. She had not suspected until now how much excitement there had been in the affairs of the last month or so, giving spice to her daily life. In the calm between the close of the busy time of haymaking and the beginning of the still busier time of harvest she was obliged to own that she regretted the absence of Walton.

The old ways in which she had grown up

were mysteriously changed. Uncle Job was quite different from what he used to be. Michael was always so gentle that his friendship did not afford her half so much pleasure as when he had occasionally scolded her. Formerly he would have resolutely forbidden her to act when he believed she was making a mistake, and she would yield. Now, he would only explain to her at what point she was likely to err, and then leave her entirely to her own devices. He would not argue or insist as he used to do: he left the whole responsibility of action upon herself; and sometimes out of pure vexation at this inexplicable, and, what was worse, inexpressible change, she would not yield. In the end she was generally obliged to own that he had been right.

One of her latest crotchets was a very good one, but it threatened to leave her without anything like a sufficient number of hands for the harvest. In engaging the harvesters she declared

her resolution not to give beer in the field, but to pay the equivalent in money at the end of each week. Polly was a great favourite throughout the district : anyone who had been in her service was sure of assistance in a time of trouble. What she had done for the labourers and their wives was not to be measured by money ; many a time in cases of illness she had risked the danger of infection and acted as nurse—fever, and even small-pox, having no terrors for her.

Her own people, therefore, were ready to stand by her in anything she might do, but even they were staggered by this daring innovation ; and the greater number of the harvesters being strangers, her proposal was rejected. She was inclined to insist, and that only made matters worse, for the agricultural agitators were at this time rousing dissension between farmers and labourers, and there was discontent throughout the land. The discovery was suddenly made by the latter that they had been long-suffering and

ill-used beings. 'Unions' were being formed everywhere, and the scale of wages was to be regulated by them and not by the employers.

The Mistress of the Meadow had been always ready to give the highest wages she could afford, and consequently had not yet been much affected by the general disturbance. But on this matter of beer she was obstinate, and ran the risk of being left with only her own people to do the harvest work. Michael was conciliatory. He advised that the arrangement should be made optional, and at length she submitted. Then she was pleasantly surprised to find that by far the greater proportion of the men and women who had refused to be coerced into the arrangement agreed to accept the money instead of the beer.

'That is sensible,' said Polly to old Carter who had been deputed to announce the decision of the harvesters. 'I never had a dispute with any of them before, and I am glad that this one

has been so easily settled. I believe the new arrangement will be better for yourselves and for me.'

She was standing at the foot of the wooden steps leading to the door of the store-loft. The building was of wood, thickly coated with tar which glistened in the sunlight. The underpart was used as a tool-house and receptacle of miscellaneous lumber, and had a separate door on one side of the steps. She had been about to ascend to the loft when Carter approached, his face beaming with satisfaction at the intelligence he had to communicate.

'Not a doubt of it, Missus,' he said cheerily, 'and we're all glad that there's an end of the matter, for we was mortal vexed that there should have been anything wrong between you and us. But you see times has changed and people want a bit of their own way. I'm not saying but they sometimes want too much of their own way.'

‘They ought to have as much as they like, so long as they don’t interfere with other people’s way.’

‘That’s just what them as didn’t know you, Missus, thought you wanted to do,’ answered Carter honestly, but with an apologetic grin for speaking so boldly.

‘Perhaps they are right, Carter; but they will find at the end of harvest that those who have taken the money have the best of it, and they will own then that I was right. However they cannot say I am interfering now.’

Her proposal had been made entirely with a view to the benefit of the people themselves, and she was glad to find it adopted under any modifications. It was Mr. Holroyd, the young curate, who had made the suggestion. He was full of enthusiasm in all matters of moral and sanitary reform, and was constantly discovering something to be improved or abolished. His activity in this respect pleased a few, amused others, and annoyed

a great many who wished to be left to the enjoyment of the customs and things which had served them quite well until this young fellow came amongst them.

Polly was one of the few who regarded the proposal to give money instead of beer to the labourers as a great improvement on the old system, and she had made an attempt to carry it into practice. She had succeeded to a certain extent ; but the success was not so complete as to impress her with the idea that she was born to be a reformer.

‘ Why can’t they see it ? ’ she said to Michael, still wondering at the obtuseness of her subjects.

‘ Because the points of view are different. They look on the supply of beer, not as part of their wages, but as an old-established privilege ; and there are many better informed people than our labourers who prefer a privilege to any compensation in money. But you have done a good thing for them in giving them their choice, and

the best thing for yourself at the same time. You could never have forced them to take your view of the matter, but they will soon come to understand the value of the arrangement when they see it in practice amongst their friends. I have made the same agreement with our people at Marshstead ; and I believe Tyler has done so, too, at the Brook.'

It was a satisfaction to know that two at least of her neighbours were carrying out the same plan as herself, and on the day on which operations were to begin she went out with a merry heart to meet the harvesters.

It was early morning, the air full of bird-music, the sky so clear that there were no shadows cast upon the fields of golden grain which rippled and glanced merrily in the sunlight as if nature rejoiced in the bounteous store to be gathered in.

At the top of the home-field Polly met the group of men and women, all bright and smiling, and dressed with more than usual neatness, as

if they were bent on a holiday rather than a hard day's work. There was a sharp rasping of scythes, and the party attached to the reaping machine were taking a last survey of the gear to make sure that every part was in good going order.

But all turned to the Mistress when she appeared amongst them. She gave them kindly greetings and they responded with hearty wishes for a goodly ingathering, congratulating her upon the rich promise made by the appearance of the crops. The exhilaration of the morning air stirred the blood and made all eager to begin the great work of the year.

Polly took a reaping hook, and whilst the others looking on, cut the first sheaf; deftly she platted two lengths of straw together, bound the sheaf, neatly, and placed it on end.

Then there was a ringing cheer; the scythes flashed and swished through the ripe grain as the reapers, followed by the gatherers and binders, fell into their places. The reaping machine was



'Polly took a reaping-hook, and cut the first sheaf.'

driven through a gap in the hedge to the next field where it was to be employed. A hum of voices and sounds of merry laughter now joined in the chorus of the birds, and harvest had begun.

CHAPTER XXVI.

SHE WOULD AND SHE WOULD NOT.

‘It is more than five weeks since Mr. Walton left home,’ said Sarah, her knitting needles working in and out dexterously, and swiftly transforming a ball of wool into a stocking.

The observation was made suddenly, but it was the outcome of a long train of reflections.

‘Is it?’ said Polly, yawning. ‘We have got on very well without him.’

She looked up from her book as if she would be glad to exchange reading for conversation. They had been sitting together for a long time in silence—a habit lately more marked than usual—and the twilight was so rapidly fading into darkness that Polly had been straining her eyes

during the last ten minutes to make out the printed words. She was sitting with her back to the window, and on raising her eyes she encountered a quick inquisitive glance from Sarah's eyes. The latter :

‘ You have not missed him much, apparently.’

‘ Why should I miss him or anybody when there was so much work on hand ?’

‘ I thought you would have missed him. He was only to be away a fortnight.’

There was a faint indication as of shortness of breath in the quick, nervous manner of her speech.

‘ Well, I suppose he has been enjoying himself in his own way. Where did he go to ?’

‘ You know he went to Newmarket, and then to London ; then he went to the Goodwood, and back to London, and nothing has been heard of him since.’

‘ You seem to know all about his movements ; has he written to you ?’

‘No. I saw his sister yesterday, and she told me this. At the same time she wished me to ask if he had written to you, as they are getting anxious about him.’

Polly thought herself lucky that her back was towards the window, otherwise Sarah could not have failed to observe the flush which came to her cheek. But Sarah did observe it, in spite of Polly’s position and the rapidly deepening shadows; and she became pale.

Walton had written to her twice; she had not answered the letters, but she intended to do so, and had been meditating night and day what her answer was to be. There was a pause. In that dim light Polly felt better able to speak in confidence to her cousin than she had done for some weeks past. And so, quite gravely, she said:

‘Yes, he has written, Sarah, and I have not replied, because I do not know what to say to him, and I would rather not answer him at all.’

‘What is the difficulty?’

The knitting needles seemed to fly, and what little light there was seemed to flash from them. Polly laid her book on the table, pushed the chair back, got up, and began to pace the room.

‘The difficulty is that I don’t know what to say,’ she replied, by and by. ‘He wants me to marry him : I like him very much, but I don’t think I like him well enough at present to do that.’

She was talking more to herself than replying to her cousin. She was utterly unconscious of the pain which those quickly moving needles expressed.

‘He does seem to like me, and says he would do anything for my sake,’ she went on, still speaking as if to herself. ‘Now, it would not be fair of me to say yes or no, until I felt quite sure whether or not I was ready to give up everything for him. Would it?’

‘No!’ with emphasis ; then in a lower tone,

‘but do you think he would give up everything for you?’

‘He says so.’

‘Would he give up races and betting, for instance?’

‘He says that he will never attend another race or make another bet if I will say yes; but that if I say no, he will go as fast as he can to——’

‘The devil! that’s where he is going to, at any rate, and as we are alone you might just as well say it outright. Do you believe in his promises?’

‘No—at least, not without a good many grains of salt.’

‘Then tell him so, and that will answer him. You cannot hesitate if you do not believe in his promises.’

‘I am not quite prepared to say that I do not believe in them, for I think he would *try* to keep them.’

‘And you know he would fail.’

Polly halted at the window. The trees were forming into dense black masses, with here and there a glimpse of light like the eyes of wood-gnomes peering out in search of the first opportunity to begin their pranks; and the headlines, touching the sky where the last reflection of the setting sun still lingered, formed into curious shapes of faces, towers and spires, and serpentine convolutions, to which the imagination would give form, according to what was uppermost in the mind. The sweet stillness of the scene and hour might have soothed the most distracted brain. And through this calm scene the shadow of Michael Hazell passed more than once; but it was so distant that she was only faintly conscious of its presence. She was thinking about Tom Walton.

‘Yes, he would fail,’ she said at length, as if unaware that there had been any lapse of time between Sarah’s remark and the response.

‘What would you do then?’

‘I don’t know what I might do; and its just the fear of that which makes me uncomfortable and unable to make up my mind.’

‘I can tell what you would do: there would be a quarrel and a separation. By and by, you would make it up, and you would go on more or less smoothly together until the next quarrel and separation; and so you would go on to the end, both of you discontented and miserable.’

‘If I cared enough for him, I think he might be kept straight—but I don’t. . . . What ought I to do?’

‘If you asked my advice with any intention of being guided by it, I could answer.’

‘I would rather have your advice than that of anyone else on this matter; and I would be guided by it—if I felt that you were right.’

‘Ah, that is an important condition—but all counsel is subject to it. The only advice anybody takes is that which chimes in with one’s

own humour. I will tell you what I would do--I would leave him to the woman who cares enough for him to risk her happiness on the chance of keeping him straight ; and who, failing in that, would still be faithful to him when he sank into the worst state of poverty.'

There was energetic earnestness in the voice, indicating that the words sprang from the depths of her heart. Polly did not observe that. She sat down by the window, resting her elbow on the ledge and watching the droll outlines of the trees and gathering clouds, ever changing as the light faded.

'Is there such a woman?'

'I believe there is.'

'Where?'

'He will find her. I told you once that he would never marry you even if you were willing to take him ; and I said that because I know the woman who would sacrifice everything for him exists. Leave him alone, Polly, for his sake as

well as your own. Or, if you still doubt what you ought to do, try him; say that you are as poor as I am, and watch how quickly his ardour will cool.'

Polly opened her eyes and her mouth too at this strange sally; the suggestion was equally degrading to her and to the man. She did not like it, and she spoke with some symptoms of rising temper.

'Do you know what you are saying, Sarah? Do you think he cares for me only for what I have, and not for what I am?'

'I say, try him,' was the dogged response, but there was an implied sneer in the words and tone which made Polly feel very hot.

'How could that be done without marrying him?'

'Easily. Tell him that you have been more seriously involved in the bank failure than you had at first supposed, and that you have scarcely enough left to keep the farm going without the

aid of others. Tell him that, and see what will happen.' u

'How could I tell him such a lie?' was the impatient exclamation, for the idea that she was dependent on others in order to carry on the farm was irritating in the extreme, even as a mere fancy.

'You wanted to test him,' answered Sarah, with sudden coldness, 'and yet you are afraid.'

'I am not afraid, but he would be as ridiculous as you are in proposing such a thing if he did not at once see that I was making fun of him. He would not believe it, and he would laugh at me.'

'I will undertake that he shall believe it, and that he shall not laugh at you.'

But Polly laughed. Her cousin's vehement persistence contrasted so comically—as she thought—with the absurdity of the proposed test, that it restored her good humour.

'Very well, I will show that advice can be

taken although its wisdom is doubted. I will try him as soon as he comes back. I will dress myself in one of Dame Carter's dowdy gowns and say to him, "Please, sir, I was rich and I find myself now very poor. Do you still wish me to be mistress of Walton Abbey?" But, mind, I don't promise to accept him even if he should say yes.'

'What, not if you knew that he believed you?'

'I doubt if I could ever bring myself to think that he did so. But there is fun in the frolic, and I shall try to look as woe-begone as possible. Then, when he tells me that he is not to be taken in by such nonsense, I will tell him who was the inventor of the trick.'

Sarah moved uneasily in her chair, and groped about in the darkness for her worsted. Polly lit the lamp. Although she had at first scouted the idea of this scheme, she was presently interested in imagining all sorts of droll in-

cidents which would attend its development, and was delighted by the prospect of a harmless practical joke. Even her sad cousin might enjoy a laugh at the performance, for she was quite resolved to play the part of the beggar-maiden to perfection.

Sarah was the last to go to bed, and as she went about, candle in hand, examining bolts and bars, she was like one walking in sleep. Every movement was measured and mechanical; the step was slow, and the eyes were always fixed on something far away. The white face, made almost ghastly by the flickering glare of the candle and the moving shadows on the walls, was expressionless. As she ascended the stairs she seemed to pause on every step. On every step she was asking herself a bitter question: 'What am I doing?' On every step she answered the question: 'It is for her good, as much as my own—ay, more than my own. It is not wrong,

it is right I am doing, and she will be grateful to me by and by : and he will be grateful——’

But there the thought found utterance in a broken sob ; for she feared that he, instead of being grateful, might scorn her for what she was doing. Then faintly the words ‘God help me !’ were spoken by somebody : she knew that they were only echoes in her brain, and yet they seemed to be spoken by somebody who pitied her. She pitied herself.

The light fell on Polly’s door, which was partly open. The door faced that of Sarah’s room. Sarah hesitated a minute, and then went into her cousin’s bedroom.

‘Are you sleeping, Polly ?’

The calm, regular breathing of one in healthy sleep was the only answer. Sarah went quietly out, and the moment of confidence was lost. She was in the mood then to have laid bare her heart ; to have uttered the cry which she had so long pent that it seemed now about to burst

bounds, and in doing so, kill her. If Polly had only been awake, how gladly she would have told her everything !

She entered her own room and fastened the door. In one corner there were four brown japanned tin boxes, fitted with Bramah locks, and like those which are piled up in the rooms of solicitors: the name of a person or a property was printed on the front of each. They were deed boxes which had belonged to her father; but the deeds, wills, and other legal documents had been duly delivered to their owners; and they now contained the private papers and letter-books of the late Robert Hodsoll. These she had preserved at the break-up of her father's establishment lest information should be required from them at some future time by any of the clients whose affairs were mentioned in them. She was herself the first who had required assistance from those records of past passions and past follies.

Night after night during the last month, when she was supposed to be in bed, she was busy examining the papers and letter-books with eager eyes that were strained as much by excitement as by the effort to decipher the frequently indistinct lines by the aid of a single candle. The task was a long one, but she never wearied page after page was scanned with that slow obstinacy which generally attains success. Often her eyes ached, and her body, too; she rested a moment, and then resumed her search. At length—a week before the conversation of this night—she found what she wanted. In one of the letter-books was an exact account of the disposal of all old Holt's money. She placed that volume on the top of the others; an old envelope marked the place in the book, and she now knew almost as much as Michael or Job Hazell as to Polly's financial position.

She had gloated over the cold, precise statement of affairs as if she had found in it a treasure

beyond all price. In the first flush of triumph she felt like one who, having been badly used, has become suddenly endowed with the means of retaliation, and is determined to use them. But she wanted to be just to her cousin; she wanted to be just to Walton. He had caused her much suffering, but she would not take undue revenge, and so, in the course of six anxious days and nights of reflection, her discovery gradually dwindled in value. It was in her power to make Walton's selfish nature smart keenly by letting him know that the greater part of Polly's wealth depended upon the good will of Job Hazell; but in doing so she would hurt Polly too, and Michael more than either. Besides, was Walton after all so base as to think only of the money? She was full of bitterness in all her thoughts of him; she said to herself many times that she hated him; and yet she could not always feel satisfied that he was so contemptible as that. Hence a difficulty in deciding how to act.

For some time she believed that Polly's heart was given to Michael; if she had remained certain of that, she would have known what to do. But everything recently had tended to show that Polly was wavering, and Sarah's jealous eyes magnified trifles into proofs of the truth of this conclusion. Polly's confession removed all doubt. Then she had hit on the plan of making Polly herself test Walton, without letting her know that it was at Michael's cost she remained an heiress. Whatever the result might be, it would be good for all of them.

With this specious sophistry she soothed her conscience, and determined that her action was just.

CHAPTER XXVII.

JOB'S WILL.

EVERYTHING appeared to have fallen into its normal routine during Walton's absence. It seemed as if some disturbing element had been removed from the place, and the atmosphere had been cleared. Michael resumed his old place as general adviser at the Meadow. The harvest work progressed rapidly and satisfactorily; the sun shone, the sky was bright and calm. Polly's life was full of business and of the serenity inspired by the sense that all things were going well.

There were two shadows, however, crossing the brightness of these days. Sarah's health was

evidently failing, yet she would neither consult the doctor nor own that there was anything the matter with her. The second and more important shadow was made by the increasing eccentricity of Uncle Job, and his impatience at the delay of the marriage which in his mind had become a fixed event. It was dangerous as well as useless to contradict him; and so, to his persistent inquiries evasive answers had to be given by Polly as well as Michael—an unpleasant task for both.

When the harvest began, Job was the first in the field, the first to begin the work of the day, and the last to leave off. He insisted on doing a full day's work, on sharing the simple fare provided for the harvesters, and at the end of the week he demanded his pay like the others. Often his strength would fail, and Michael, who was always watching him with sad eyes, would offer to complete the task for him. Then Job would turn to him angrily:

‘Go do your own work, and leave me to mine. You know that I am as poor as any of those people who call me master, and we want all the hands we can use ourselves to save us from being turned out of the farm. Go and do your own share; you must do it, if we are to live honest and pay our debts.’

‘All right, dad.’

‘It ain’t all right till we are out of the wood, and the end is a long bit away yet.’ And Job would rise up from the sheaf he had been binding, to wipe the perspiration from his wrinkled brow.

‘We’ll do our best, anyhow,’ was the cheery answer, as Michael stooped, bound up the sheaf, and placed it on end beside two others.

‘It does me good to hear you speak that way, lad. We’ll manage to pull through, I dare say; but we must work hard.’

‘And we are working hard. Why, you are almost equal to the youngest fellows in the

field.' Saying this, Michael was going on steadily with the work his father was eager to accomplish.

'Ah, I was a good hand in my time, Michael. They used to say there wasn't a scythesman in the two counties could cut one acre for my two. But I'm getting old and stiff, not what I used to be at all. And it is a hard thing when you have earned rest, to have to turn to again and work, just as though you had done nothing all your days. But work is comforting. When I'm binding up a sheaf, or get a scythe in my hand, I seem to forget about that fool's business I got into and that swindling bank—for it was a swindle, and a darned swindle. . . . But I do miss your mother, lad; more nor ever since this happened.'

He glanced round vaguely as if seeking her; then with a sigh he pushed Michael aside and resumed the work himself.

'Maybe, it ain't a misfortune after all; only

a living of my youth over again. I try to think so, but I can't do it when I'm idle.'

The restless activity of his brain only found relief when his hands were busy and he was able to imagine himself restoring the fallen fortunes of Marshstead.

Scenes like this became more and more frequent. The son was always patiently watching, ready to help at any moment without appearing to interfere or to suggest that his assistance was necessary. We are led by our humours as much as by our reason when at its best; and so Michael endeavoured to make his father feel that everything he did was of great value to the farm and would soon make them as rich as if they had never lost anything.

Michael saw not only the failing of his father's intellect but the rapid breaking up of his physical condition, and all his affectionate care was powerless to check the decay. That is the most terrible of all the trials of human nature

and human strength—to be obliged to stand by and see the being we love slowly passing from us, and to feel our own utter helplessness. Such an experience enables us to understand how merciful Death is when he strikes only one prompt blow.

By-and-by Job was unable to rise from his chair, and he fretted greatly that a young man like him should have lost the power of his limbs when the harvest was going on and he had so much to do. He found some solace in giving his querulous orders as to the work to be done. Michael attended punctually every morning to receive his commands, and at meals and in the evening duly reported progress. This gratified the old man and satisfied him that, although a prisoner in the house, he was still an active element in the business of the farm.

When he was taken out to the garden he always had his seat placed so that he could see the part of the hedge which he had last pruned.

Resting his hands on his thick staff and his chin on them, he would look over the golden fields towards the Meadow, and he still imagined that he could see the roof of Polly's house amongst the trees in the distance. Turning his head a little to the right, he commanded a view of the outbuildings of his own farm and of the stacks of grain which were rapidly increasing in number as the harvest work went on. The latter scene afforded him special joy, and nodding his head as he counted each stack and calculated its value again and again, he would say :

‘Not bad, Michael, not bad at all. If we had only two or three years like this we could soon make way.’

Then he would sit silent for a long time, but never quite still : with quick, short movements of the head he glanced from the hedge to the yard, and it would have been difficult to say in which direction his eyes lingered longest. While he sat thus, Michael would sometimes read the

newspaper to him : he paid no heed to anything except the prices of cattle and grain. One day his interest even in this subject did not hold his attention.

‘ Oats were in better demand,’ read Michael, ‘ but barley was depressed. The supply of wheat was short, and trade in——’

‘ I want to see Patchett,’ interrupted Job.

‘ What do you want him for, dad ? ’ inquired the son, folding the paper.

‘ To make my will.’

‘ Why, you did that only a few weeks ago, and you cannot want to alter it already.’

‘ I want to see Patchett,’ was the obstinate retort.

‘ Very well, I’ll tell him when I go to the market.’

‘ You must go to-morrow, or I’ll send somebody else for him.’

Michael said ‘ Very well ’ again, believing that by the morning his father would have forgotten

his desire to see the attorney. He frequently made requests which he entirely forgot in a few minutes. But it was not so with this request, for he reiterated it at intervals until there was something painfully monotonous in the sound--

‘I want to see Patchett.’

Michael was anxious—not on his own account—that there should be no alteration in the last will; but at length he felt that he must go to the lawyer. That gentleman listened to his grave explanations about his father’s condition and desire to see him, without appearing to regard the matter as of much consequence.

‘Don’t trouble yourself about his anxiety to make a new will. That’s a common feeling when one is in a weak state and there is something to leave, and sometimes when there is nothing to leave. I have often made half-a-dozen wills within a week for a man. I must see your father, of course.’

‘He will not be contented until you do.’

‘Very well; and do you still desire the will to stand in its present form?’

‘Yes; any alteration would only cause unnecessary annoyance to Miss Holt and to me, without making any difference in my determination that the money is to be paid to her.’

The lawyer’s eyes rested on him for an instant with something like the expression of one who sees a strange animal. Mr. Patchett was very fat, jovial, and easy-going in his manners. He had thin fair hair, pale blue eyes, and a soft round face, the habitual expression of which was that of the most innocent good nature. His geniality and his songs made him a favourite at all the farmers’ gatherings; in his practice he was known to be one of the acutest of attorneys.

‘You know your own business best, Hazell,’ he said, after a momentary pause. ‘You can tell your father to expect me at twelve to-morrow, and you ought to be there too.’

‘He will not allow me to be present. But

you know my wishes, Mr. Patchett, and I depend on you to do what may be done to prevent any alteration of the will.'

Precisely what Michael had feared took place. By much argument and entreaty he had prevailed on his father to omit from the will, which was now to be altered, any mention of the sacrifice they were making to keep Polly's patrimony intact. In the new will, although there was to be no alteration in the disposal of the money, Job insisted upon inserting a full statement of all his transactions with Holt—how the bank stock had been transferred to him absolutely, with only an informal private agreement that he should restore all to Polly when she married Michael, or some one else who should be fortunate enough to win Job Hazell's approval.

'I have already told you,' said Patchett, 'that you are not bound to restore this money. It was her father who made the investment.'

‘It don’t matter about that, for you see, as they are going to be married soon, it will all come into the right hands in the end. But they have been shuffling and putting off the marriage so that I couldn’t rest without making the whole business clear if so be that I am gone before the wedding day comes. Then if anything goes wrong she’ll know what her father wanted and what I wanted.’

The lawyer was obliged to take his instructions, and when Michael learned their nature, he resolved that Polly should never know the contents of the will.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE FROLIC.

SURELY this was a very wicked hoax that she had pledged herself to play upon Walton. Polly had always been ready to take part in a joke, and she was ready enough for this one, notwithstanding her conviction that he would at once see through the flimsy scheme. Then he would join in the laugh, or he would try to make fun of her. It would be good sport, however, if she could persuade him for a moment that she was really ruined, to watch the effect upon him, and to see his astonishment when the announcement was made that it was all a jest and she was in exactly the same position as before. Should he hesitate, she would dismiss the faithless swain,

and bid him never speak to her any more. If it had only been his eldest sister who was to be the victim of the prank she would have entered into it with more relish.

There was one drawback to the prospective amusement; it was a little too personal. It was like confessing that she thought him a fool, or that she was a fool herself and had adopted this poor trick with the notion of sounding the depths of his devotion—as if they could be sounded by such means if there were any depth at all! In that view she rather hesitated; and it became daily more clear to her that if she had loved him she never would have dared to enter into such a frolic.

At length it became known that Walton had returned. His prolonged absence—and that at harvest time, too—had been remarked by everybody. Walton was of the utmost value to the district in one way—he afforded inexhaustible material for that kind of evergreen gossip which

is repeated and listened to with an air of pitying interest. He had been attending races everywhere, and he had been gambling desperately. So much was agreed upon by all ; but there was a considerable divergence of opinion as to whether he had lost every farthing that Walton Abbey could pay and more, or had come back with a 'pot of money.' As both versions of his adventures were related upon the best authority there was no lack of discussion as to which was right, and consequently restless tongues were supplied with plenty of occupation.

Polly enjoyed many a quiet laugh at what was in store for him as she walked about the fields, surveying the work and exchanging remarks with the men and women who were toiling in the yellow heat of the day. The matter was frequently in her mind, but it did not interfere with the business or pleasure of the moment.

Although she had not answered his letters, there was no doubt he would make his appear-

ance soon after his arrival—if he did not, so much the better. He did not, and she began to wonder. Several times in the field she caught herself looking quickly round when there was the sound of a footstep behind her. On the first occasion she saw Toby Carter carrying a can of water and an earthenware mug to the thirsty harvesters; on the second, it was only a girl gleaning.

The next time, it was the dull thud of a horse's hoofs galloping over the stubble which attracted her attention, and Walton, Jim, and Bones were beside her. He flung himself out of the saddle almost before the horse stopped, and having slung the bridle over his left arm, he shook her hand warmly. Bones sat down at the horse's head as he had been taught to do.

This was not the way in which she had intended to meet him; she was to be looking very pale and depressed, not flushed with healthy exercise and contented with all her surroundings.

But she was taken by surprise and had no time to assume the air of melancholy she had intended for his benefit. In the hurried interchange of the usual commonplaces she could not be much less cordial than he was, and indeed forgot her part in a most reprehensible manner, although she had rehearsed it frequently to herself during the last few days.

‘ Sarah told me I would find you here, and how well you look ! ’

There was another blow to the scheme, and she felt almost too much inclined to laugh at being so caught to be able to proceed. But she had the satisfaction of being able to tell him that he did not look well. He looked paler and thinner than before he went away.

‘ Ah, but you have been living in a sensible way, and I haven’t,’ he said, laughing ; ‘ excitement during the day, heavy dinners and more excitement at night, for nearly two months are not conducive to health.’

‘You were only to be away for a fortnight.

‘You did not answer my letters. If you had, I would have been back sooner.’

‘What! do you mean to blame me for—’ she was going to say ‘for your dissipation,’ but she put it in a milder form and said—‘for your being away so long?’

‘I do: only you could have kept me away.’

He looked quite serious, and that was a sufficiently remarkable circumstance to assure her that he was in earnest.

‘I really cannot see how the blame should fall upon me, Mr. Walton,’ she said, somewhat coldly; for she felt that her whole plan was being upset, because he would not do and say the things she had expected.

The harvesters had gone far ahead of the place where they were standing, and a line of golden sheaves marked their track. A frightened hare darted out from amongst the wheat, scudded across the stubble, and disappeared through the

hedge into the next field. It passed so close that it startled the horse.

‘Quiet, Jim,’ said Walton, patting his horse’s neck, and then resumed the conversation. ‘I will tell you how. My first note asked you, did you *wish* me to come back, and silence was taken as a polite negative, as the advertisements say. But I did feel a little sore about it when, after watching every post for a week, I had to make up my mind to take your silence in that way, and went off to enjoy myself elsewhere.’

‘Was it not good of me to give you the opportunity?’ and there was a twinkling smile on her face which indicated that she had recovered from whatever surprise she had felt.

‘I didn’t think so, although the sport was good, and the fun was good, and I came away a winner.’

‘Why, half of that should afford you reason enough for being grateful to me!’

‘But the whole of it didn’t, for I would much rather have been with you than in London.’

‘Thank you,’ and she made a curtsey.

‘My second note told you,’ he went on, steadily holding to his point in spite of her attempts to break down the serious manner he had assumed, ‘that I would not return, or at any rate not see you, until you asked me to do so.’

‘You had no answer to that either, and so, to prove your sincerity, here you are, uninvited.’

He was not in the least crushed by this retort, for as soon as he had soothed Jim, who had become restive again, he answered quietly :

‘Exactly, that is why I am here—to prove my sincerity.’

‘By contradicting your own words?’

‘Yes. I was put out by your silence; I was angry, and what was worse, I began to feel that it was hopeless to seek you. But now—’ he paused; she did not help him, and so he added somewhat awkwardly, ‘now I am here to ask you again, will you risk yourself with me? I

believe we could get on together, and although I do live pretty much from hand to mouth I believe that we could overcome anything if we were together.'

She saw her opportunity : he was sentimental : he was trying to make her believe that her smiles would butter the driest crust. Now was the time for the beggar-maiden to appear. Polly looked round to make sure that all the people were well out of the way, and the new character made her entrance.

She bowed her head so that he could not see her face, and proceeded in a very subdued tone :

'It is very kind of you, Mr. Walton, and I am flattered, of course, but before you press me for an answer I would like you to understand something.'

'What is it?'

'It cannot, I am sure, affect your decision, but I think it is right to tell you that, although I am supposed to be very well off, the failure of

the bank has taken almost everything from me, and I have now barely enough to carry on the farm !'

She glanced archly at him from beneath her drooping eyelids to see the effect of this terrible announcement. His countenance did not change.

'I know it, Polly,' he answered gravely, and that is why I am here to ask you to be my wife !'

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE SCRAPE.

POLLY lifted her eyes and looked straight in his face; its pallor and gravity puzzled her extremely. Then she laughed in a subdued, half-ashamed way, and for the moment she did not observe his astonishment.

‘I see you have found me out,’ she said with a reckless smile, although there was visible a certain degree of force in the gaiety. ‘I knew you would, and I told Sarah that you would detect the trick at once.’

‘The trick?’ he exclaimed bewilderedly.

‘Yes, and I warned Sarah that I would tell who had advised me to play it. It was ridiculous.

I said so from the first, but she dared me to try it, and I have done so with the result anticipated.'

'I don't understand you,' he said seriously.

At that Polly laughed the more, and he, resting his arm on Jim's neck, looked more and more astounded and curious.

'You are the victor,' she cried merrily; 'you play your part to perfection, and I have utterly failed in mine, but tell the truth—you were prepared for it. Somebody warned you?'

'Yes, I was warned and I was prepared for what you have told me, but I was not prepared to find you take it in this manner.'

If his tone meant anything, it was that he thought her reason had been affected by her misfortune, and the continued laughter with which she hailed his reply increased the suspicion.

'Well done, well done! But if you please, sir, you must own that it was not fair play to me that you should be put up to the joke.'

He was dumbfounded, and looked at that

moment the least likely person in the world capable of playing a part in a hoax. She was not to be taken in; it was all his cleverness, and he thought to compromise her somehow by pretending to treat the matter seriously. Why, he had owned that he had been warned, and he was just keeping up the game in order to punish her. She noted, too, that he called her 'Polly' now, as if he had a right to do so; hitherto he had always hesitated in assuming that privilege, although it was his habit to salute everybody by the Christian name after a day's acquaintance: but as a rule he had used the formal 'Miss Holt' in addressing her.

'I cannot see the joke, Polly,' he said perplexedly. 'I wish I could, for your sake.'

There was an inexplicable something in his manner which brought an expression of blank astonishment to her face. Sarah had said that she would insure that he should regard her statement as true; she had not explained how she was

to accomplish this, but it was evident that he was either the most perfect actor or he did take the matter seriously. Could it be possible that he believed her? She began to feel more than uncomfortable, and yet she was afraid to allow him the triumph of having beaten her with her own weapons, of making her the victim of the hoax when she had intended to be the hoaxer.

She determined to end the farce at once.

‘I own myself beaten, Mr. Walton,’ she said, half laughing, although secretly more inclined to cry with vexation; ‘you are by far the better actor, and I give in. It was only a wicked attempt to tease you, and I am sorry for having entered into it—indeed, indeed I have many a time during the last few days felt quite vexed with myself for having been so foolish as to consent to such an absurd thing, even for a moment. I don’t think I ever would have agreed to it if I had not felt sure that you could not be deceived.’

She expected him to laugh, and to say that

she had done her part very well so far, but he answered more seriously than ever :

‘I would have been glad to have been deceived.’

‘Well, you can be glad in knowing yourself the victor. It is only poor Uncle Job who suffers by the bank failure : it makes no difference to me, except the grief I feel that neither he nor Michael will permit me to do anything for them.’

She felt awkward, and she knew that she looked awkward, and she was anxious to make amends for the frolic.

‘Are you carrying the joke a stage farther?’ he observed, with very apparent sarcasm ; ‘or are you in earnest now?’

‘I am quite in earnest, Mr. Walton,’ she said haughtily ; ‘I intended to play a harmless jest upon you ; I see you take it seriously. I beg your pardon, I can do no more.’

She bowed coldly, intimating that she had no

desire to continue the conversation, and turned to follow the harvesters.

He called, and there was such a sharp note of pain in his voice that she halted at once.

‘Stop, Polly, for God’s sake. We are playing at cross purposes in some strange way—it is you who have lost by the bank failure, not Hazell and his son, although out of good-nature they are trying to keep the truth from you!’

She looked back at him with a white, startled face; but she regained her self-possession instantly: this was his retaliation.

‘I have begged your pardon, Mr. Walton, and I cannot see what benefit you look forward to by trying to make me feel more ashamed of myself than I am already.’

The word ‘benefit’ stung.

‘I neither look forward nor backward; I keep a sharp eye on the present, and let the other times take care of themselves.’

‘Then, what is it you mean?’

‘That you are still trying to deceive me or that you are yourself deceived. I tell you, it is you who are the loser, not the Hazells.’

‘It is no use, Mr. Walton,’ she answered, shaking her head and smiling; ‘when you make such a serious charge as that against Uncle Job and the truest friend I have ever known, you must allow me to say that the jest is at an end.’

‘The jest *is* at an end. If you do not believe me, go to old Hazell—don’t go to Michael, but to his father—and ask if I have not told you the truth.’

There was a terrible earnestness in his voice and manner which he could not have simulated. All emotion seemed to be suddenly suppressed, and her heart felt as cold as if it were encased in ice. She roused herself from this state, and with signs of growing excitement asked :

‘Who told you this?’

‘No matter who; you can easily prove whether I am telling a lie or not. Say to Hazell

that you mean to marry *me*, and you will hear the truth.'

'I will go at once, but I shall not say that.'

'Very well, in twenty minutes you can be there. Your horses are all out, but I will harness Jim—don't be afraid,' he added hastily, as she was about to interrupt, 'I will only drive you to the foot of the lane, and wait for you there.'

She made no further objection. In ten minutes, Jim, yoked in Polly's wagonette, was proving his pace to her along the dusty road which lay between the Meadow and Marshstead farms. Walton had often tried to induce her to test the horse's powers, but he had never anticipated that she was to test them in a journey made for the purpose of discovering whether or not Jim's master was a liar

CHAPTER XXX.

A PIPELIGHT.

POLLY had forgotten all about the Doctor's orders that Job was on no account to be excited. She did not know that at each succeeding visit the order had been insisted upon with increasing emphasis; and much of Michael's time was taken up in carrying out the injunction. All business matters were passed over as lightly as it was possible to do without making Job feel that everything was done and said to please him, because absolute quietude was necessary. His excursions to the garden-seat had become rapidly less frequent; and although the atmosphere was warm to those in health, he spent most of his time shivering before a fire in the parlour, the

table drawn close to his chair with his desk and papers upon it. He still was pleased by the fancy that he was working to some purpose to retrieve his lost fortune. His pipe and his favourite ale jug were also beside him. The Doctor had made an attempt to stop the ale, but Job became so violent when he detected the attempt that the ale jug was instantly ordered back to its place.

‘It will make little difference,’ said the Doctor kindly, as he bade Michael good-bye.

Michael had not told Polly how very serious the position of his father had become; he did not like to worry her with the details of the steady progress towards the end.

The thought uppermost in her mind at this moment was that she must assure herself of the truth or falsehood of what she had been told. If it proved to be false, there could be no pardon for the man who had told her such a wicked lie. Yet he had not attempted to extort any promise

from her. He had acted straightforwardly ; he was himself conducting her as fast as he could to the place where she might most easily put his words to the proof. This did not look like the action of one who was playing a petty trick in order to entrap her into an engagement by a pretence of magnanimity and disinterested affection. So far the argument was in Walton's favour ; and, if this strange story were true, the evasion with which Michael had met all her enquiries as to the results of the bank failure would be explained.

It *might* be true ! As the idea assumed probability she felt dizzy and confused.

Jim was speeding along the road at a splendid pace ; but the pace was slow to her impatience. Spears of sunlight flashed through the trees with dazzling brightness, and the hedgerows were almost grey with dust. The road, winding in and out like a yellow ribbon, seemed of interminable length, and the glimpses of it on the

high ground a-head—fluttering through fields busy with harvest life, till it disappeared altogether amongst the trees on the horizon—suggested a journey that under the circumstances was one of torture.

Jim was pulled up sharply at the foot of the lane leading to Marshstead, and Polly was on the ground as soon as Walton, although he had leaped down the moment the horse stopped.

‘I shall wait here,’ he said.

She made no reply, but started up the lane with rapid steps. She was halfway towards the house before she could collect her thoughts at all. Then she checked her steps by a violent effort of self-control, and forced herself to walk slowly in spite of the impulsive desire to rush forward and to learn the best or the worst at once. She measured her steps; she even counted them in the strenuous endeavour to recover something like self-possession, and to realise what it was she was going to ask. She did not like to own how

much this strange story had affected her, and she could not think calmly about how she was to act.

In spite of all her efforts, she entered the parlour with flushed cheeks and out of breath.

There was Job seated in the old-fashioned arm-chair, but he was propped up by pillows, a rug over his knees, and he was as close to the fire as he could be placed without danger. There was Michael standing near him, one hand full of papers, whilst the other turned them over as if he were busy searching for something.

Michael started on Polly's entrance, hastily dropped the papers, and advanced to her.

'It was very kind of you to come,' he said, taking her hand, and adding in a nervous undertone, 'Dad is wandering a good deal to-day, and you must not mind what he says.'

'What are you jabbering about there?' grumbled the old man. 'Can't you speak up, and let us know what it's all about? No secrets here, I tell you. I won't have them; they lead

to trouble. I've suffered for them, and I won't have any more. . . . Bless my soul, Polly, it's you !'

'Yes, uncle.'

She was standing in front of him, scarcely knowing what she was to say, the change in his manner and appearance was so great since she had last seen him—only two days ago.

'What's brought you here at this time of day?' he continued querulously, and moving about in his chair as if seeking something. 'You ought to be in the fields seeing what's done. Don't you go playing the fine lady, Polly, for the master's eye is worth half-a-dozen scythes and a pair of horses, even so be as you never lifted a hand yourself. What are you doing here?'

She would have answered directly, 'Because I want to know whether it is you or I who lose by the bank failure;' but, lifting her eyes, she saw the anxious expression on Michael's face, and the Doctor's warning recurred to her.

‘I came to see you, uncle,’ she said with affected gaiety; ‘and I don’t think I shall come again if you are so ungrateful as to scold me for it.’

Whilst Job was mumbling, and still hunting uneasily for the something he had lost, she took a sheet of note paper and a pencil from the desk. She wrote hastily :

‘I want to know whose money is lost; I have information. If you do not answer, I shall speak.’

She handed it to Michael, and marked the expression of surprise and distress which passed over his face as he read the words. That was enough to confirm her fear; Walton had told the truth. Still, she wished to have the confirmation direct from Michael’s lips. Had he suspected her object in calling, and had he been trying to mislead her again by warning her, the moment she entered, that Job was wandering, so that his words were not to be regarded?

Michael was pale, but very calm. He did not attempt to write as she had done; he crumpled the paper in his hand and threw it into the grate, but it sprang back and fell inside the fender.

‘Wait,’ was the answer he gave in a quiet voice.

‘What are you two doing?’ cried Job impatiently; when he was thought to be least observant his perception of what was passing seemed to be most acute.

‘Nothing, dad.’

‘Ah, you’re good at that. You know you ought to be seeing after things when I’m not able to get about, but you’re always ready to lazy at home. It was different when I was a lad. . . . Where *is* my pipe, Michael?’

He called his son every five minutes, and then scolded him for not being out at work. Michael handed him the pipe, and Polly noted a strange nervousness in his manner. But she was determined to carry out her purpose.

‘Answer, or I shall speak,’ she whispered as he passed her.

‘What did you say?’ exclaimed Job; ‘speak? That’s just what I want you to do.’

‘So she will in a minute. Give her time to take breath. She must have been walking fast, and requires a rest. Don’t you see how flushed she is, and how bright her eyes are?’

Michael accompanied the words with such a forced laugh that Polly felt sick with apprehension, and as he spoke he hurriedly thrust into his pocket a box of matches which he took from the table.

‘Why don’t you sit down, Polly, when you are tired? Give me a light, lad.’

There were two papers lying at Job’s elbow; Michael took one of them, gave it a twist, and placed it on the table.

‘There’s paper, dad; I want to see how strong you are. Can you light it for yourself to-day?’

‘Do you think I can’t light my own pipe?’ was the indignant exclamation, as the old man snatched up the twisted paper and thrust it into the fire. ‘It’s too thick, and won’t burn,’ he added petulantly, after several ineffectual attempts to obtain a light.

‘Tear it,’ was the prompt suggestion. ‘I want to see you do it all with your own hand. Are you strong enough to tear it into strips so that Polly can make pipelights for you?’

Job, in order to prove his strength, angrily tore the charred paper into shreds and threw all into the fire except one, with which he lit his pipe; then he leaned back on his chair fatigued by his irritation more than by his exertion, but with the self-satisfied air of one who has accomplished something.

‘Now are you satisfied?’ he said, as he smoked and gasped asthmatically.

‘Very much, dad; I see you are much stronger than I believed. The Doctor will be

glad when I tell him, and Polly can bear witness how cleverly you tore up the paper and burnt it. But you did not give her a chance of making the lights for you.'

'It ain't good paper for lights, that's why I pitched it away. You can try it, Polly, if you like, with that bit there.'

He nodded towards one of the strips which had fallen at his feet. She picked it up, and mechanically began to roll it into a spiral form between her finger and thumb. The paper was stiff and the process was slow; it was tough writing-paper, and there was writing upon it. She was in no hurry, for in the occupation she found time to search for the reasons of Michael's strange manner. That his gaiety was assumed—and badly assumed—to hide some anxiety had been plain to her from the first; but she was utterly at a loss to account for his concealing the matches and insisting upon his father using the paper. That the explanation he had given was

not the real one she felt sure. She was about to give the spiral scrap a final twist, in order to secure the end, when she saw her own name upon it, written in square formal characters not at all like Michael's penmanship, and they certainly were not formed by Uncle Job's hand. She made the twist, but she did not place the pipelight on the chimney-piece.

Michael was smiling, but there was perspiration on his brow, as if he, too, had been walking fast. He was evidently trying to delay her action in spite of her threat. His motive must be a kindly one, she did not doubt. But there was mystification of some sort and she was impatient. Uncle Job came to the rescue.

'That bank failure has been a bad business for a lot of us,' he observed as he smoked meditatively.

Here was an opportunity to lead up to the information she required.

'Very bad indeed, uncle. There's poor Hibbert

of the Grange, he is completely ruined, and everything is to be sold off on Monday. Didn't you see the advertisements ?'

'No, but if he has come to such a pass I'll have that brindle cow of his. He wouldn't sell it before, but we may do him a good turn by bidding for it. She's worth a good penny, Michael; don't you lose her.'

'Can you afford to buy just now, uncle ?' said Polly.

'What should hinder ? I could afford to buy a hundred head if—' he paused, and a cloud seemed to fall over his face as he added, 'if it hadn't been for that swindling bank.'

'Then you have lost a great deal ? You have not told me about it, you know, and Michael has not given me any definite explanation, either.'

'Ay, I have lost—in a way ; and you have lost, too.'

'But nothing to speak of, is it ?'

'That will be as may happen.'

‘I wouldn’t go into these things at present,’ interrupted Michael, who was standing by the table arranging the papers. He spoke coldly, for he felt that Polly distrusted him. ‘We won’t break down under our ill luck; and Polly does not lose very much.’

‘There’s no saying what she may lose yet,’ answered Job irritably. ‘She hasn’t done what I wanted—no more have you, for the matter of that, or you’d have been married afore now, and everything settled comfortable.’

From this outburst she comprehended that there was some arrangement between the father and son which did not please the former.

‘I wish you would tell me what is my share in the losses, uncle,’ she said with quiet firmness; ‘I would like to know, and I ought to know.’

‘True enough, you ought to know. Have you put up the banns yet, Michael?’

‘Not yet, but there is time enough.’

‘Then I won’t stand it any longer,’ cried Job passionately. ‘Whose fault is it?’

‘Mine,’ said Polly calmly, but the sight of her guardian’s face made her already repent that she had pressed matters so far.

‘Yours! Then I will tell you——’

‘Dad!’

The word was uttered like a cry of pain, which startled Polly and subdued Job’s passion.

‘No, I won’t tell you; I promised I wouldn’t,’ he said, taking up the paper which lay beside him; ‘but, there, you can read my will, and that will let you see how you stand. You needn’t read it all unless you like; you’ll find what you want to know at the end.’

He emitted short quick puffs of smoke, and doggedly turned his face away from Michael. The latter breathed more freely than he had done a moment ago. He half sat on the edge of the table, swinging the foot which was lifted from the ground, and watching Polly.

She read every word carefully, searching for the promised explanation ; but she could not find it. The only clause which had direct reference to her enquiry was one to the effect that, owing to the unfortunate failure of the County Bank, and peculiar circumstances in connection with that event, the testator lamented that he was unable to bequeath to his son, Michael, the fortune he had stored up for him. Immediately after that came the expression of Job's hope that before death took him away he would see Michael wedded to Mary Holt of the Meadow Farm, as he had always regarded her with a father's affection, and the great desire of his last days was to have the right to call her daughter.

Polly was touched by the affectionate mention of her name in this passage and elsewhere, and by the bequest of many of his favourite belongings—his silver-mounted whip, several of his agricultural prize-medals, and, what he valued most of all, the Smithfield prize for his great pig.

Job expected to see her look surprised, if not angry, when she finished reading, but instead of that she rose and kissed him.

‘You are very kind, Uncle Job; I wish—I wish very much that I could please you.’

‘Have you read it all?’ gasped Job, astounded and confused by this strange way of taking what he considered a very sharp rebuke.

‘Every word of it, and I value the gifts you have made me more than I would have done a big fortune.’

‘Has she read the right will?’ said Job, turning with spasmodic jerks to the table, and dropping his pipe on the floor.

‘Yes, dad, she has read the right one,’ answered Michael without changing his position.

‘Then where’s t’other one?’

‘It was only waste paper, you know, dad, and that was it I gave you to light your pipe with.’

‘You oughtn’t to have done that without telling me, but it’s of no account, and as Polly

now knows how things stand she'll do what's right.'

'I will try, uncle,' she said awkwardly, 'but you would not like me to do what I believed to be wrong,—wrong both to Michael and to myself.'

'Can't see any wrong about it,' grumbled Job as he placed the will in the desk and locked it up; 'and if you are the lass I take you to be, you can't see more than one way out of it, though you do take it so mighty cool. They didn't want me to let you see it, but I'm glad I did, for maybe now we'll get something settled.'

'I am very grateful to you for letting me see it—and if your wishes may be carried out I—'

She did not know how to finish the sentence, her cheeks were tingling and her thoughts were performing a midge's dance.

'May be carried out!—they ought to be carried out, and you now know why.'

He was very angry by this time, and evidently

his strength was beginning to give way. So, Michael :

‘ Have no fear, Polly will do everything she can to please you. And now you must let us off for ten minutes to ourselves. Come along, Polly.’

With the presumption of an accepted suitor, he put his arm round her waist and almost lifted her towards the door ; but he whispered appealingly :

‘ Forgive me, and wait.’

Job chuckled and laughed with delight, smacking his knees with feeble hands, and tears of joy trickled down his withered cheeks.

‘ Oho, oho, lad, that’s the way of it, and you’ve both been trying to make a fool of me all the time. Ha ! ha ! ha ! well, it is darned funny, but you needn’t have worried me so long, Polly, with playing the coy maiden. Now I know why he never said a word about me showing you the will. Give her a kiss, lad, give her a hearty kiss.’

Michael boldly kissed her.

‘That’s right, that’s right, a good sounding smack. Now be off with you—two’s company, three’s none, I know. Off with you, and God bless you.’

Michael drew her out of the room and closed the door quickly, his father continuing to chuckle with gleeful satisfaction. Polly had yielded partly in confusion and partly because she knew all was done to please her guardian. Now she withdrew herself from Michael’s lingering arm. She was pallid and like one about to faint; and she said agitatedly,

‘Michael, what is this?’

CHAPTER XXXI.

BY THE BOWER.

OF the two, Michael was perhaps the most agitated. Polly's unexpected arrival had taken him by surprise. Then her object, so plainly declared, added distress to his surprise, for it pained him to think that she was willing to gratify her own curiosity at the risk of his father's life, in the teeth of the Doctor's orders. He did not reflect that she could not be so deeply impressed by these orders as he was, and that she had not heard them repeated so often. He had dared everything for her sake in the first instance, and in the second, for his father's. It was strange that the parent should have only the second place ; but it was so.

Michael had been cruelly tried during the last half-hour. It was necessary to save his father from the excitement which would certainly follow an explanation—an excitement which might prove fatal to him, and he was determined that Polly should not read the statement of the real position inserted in the last-made will. He had been abruptly brought face to face with a dilemma for which he was quite unprepared, and he had been obliged to act on the inspiration of the moment. In sheer desperation he had played a part repugnant to every sentiment of his nature : and he had succeeded !

But now he was obliged to carry on the deception; he had to apologise to Polly for his strange conduct without being free to reveal all his motives to her.

‘I beg your pardon, Polly; my father’s life was at stake, and I was compelled to act as I have done.’ Then his conscience gave him a twinge, and he added nervously, ‘I had other

reasons, but there is no necessity to speak about them. I hope you will forgive me.'

She was still in a state of half-fright and half-indignation, strongly spiced with suspicion that he was keeping from her the most important point of all.

'What are the other reasons?'

'We must not talk here, it will disturb dad. Take my arm till we pass the window. It will please him to see us so. You can withdraw it then.'

He thought she seemed to hesitate, and that was the unkindest cut of all. But she did not take away her arm although he felt that it rested coldly on his. As they were passing the window he looked in, and nodded gaily to his father: and when they had passed, his countenance became again agitated. He was trying to make out how he might answer her questions satisfactorily without betraying his secret. The glow of sunlight which fell upon them made their

mental storm of doubt and troublous forebodings seem the darker and more threatful.

If he could only have said to her, 'I love you so much that your ease of mind is more precious to me than any amount of money. I want you still to possess the fortune which you believe to be yours; but I know you would refuse to accept it at my hands. I believe that you have a right to it, although you would say no, and the law, if appealed to, might say no.' I could accept anything from your hands, because I love you so. But, my darling, my darling, I fear that you cannot knowingly accept this from me because you do not love me enough. Marry anybody you like, but leave me my secret happiness in knowing that I have done you a service.'

But he could not say that without appearing to take advantage of the position to plead his cause. If he had spoken thus, things might have gone differently; but it was impossible to tell part of the story without telling the whole.

‘Don’t ask me what the other reasons are,’ he said, with subdued passion, as they walked under the shade of apple and cherry trees. ‘Is it not enough that whatever I have done has been for my father’s sake—and yours? You know how he wishes us to be married. The idea haunts him day and night; he is never done talking of it, and even in his dreams he urges me to claim you. Polly, Polly, since you cannot love me, at least be my friend. I ask your forgiveness for all that I have said and done. There was no time for me to choose my words or actions, and I do love you, Polly—so much that I think I can be content with only your friendship. At least I would try.’

His half-suppressed emotion had more effect upon her than any outburst of passion could have had in her present mood. She had recovered from one state of agitation only to fall into another. She felt that she had been cruel to him in doubting him for a moment, and yet he was

unkind, too, in denying her his confidence. The mystification continued; he had explained nothing, and she could not forget the manner in which the will had been burned.

‘I know that you would do a great deal for my sake, and I do not feel that I deserve it. I do not feel that I could do nearly so much for you as I am sure you would do for me, and that is why —why’—(faltering for the right phrase which would be clear without paining him) —‘that is why I do not like you to suffer on my account.

She spoke softly, almost as if she were appealing to him not to press her too far, lest in her friendship she should say more than she intended. His eyes brightened with hope.

‘I am glad you believe so much of me, Polly; but why will you not believe more? If there were any sacrifice to make for your happiness that was in my power, I would make it, and would be happy, if you could only care enough

for me to say that you were pleased and relieved, instead of saying that it vexed you.'

'I didn't say that, Michael,' she replied awkwardly, as she was puzzling out the meaning of it all; 'I did not say that, only I would rather not—'

She paused, and he with some bitterness completed the sentence.

'You would rather not be under any obligation to me. Very well, I do not wish you to feel obliged to me, or to grant me any favour as a matter of gratitude or payment. I wish you to be free to do what you think will give you most happiness. That is why I have acted as I have done.'

'That is not what I mean, either. Why do you catch at my words and interpret them so badly? Your conduct has been queer ever since the failure of the bank. Of course you must feel put out; I know that, and have tried to make allowance for it. But I have had information so

strange and bewildering that I don't know what to do or think. Why will you not help me by explaining exactly how matters stand?'

For an instant Michael was tempted to take this course, no matter what the consequence might be. His fixed purpose to conceal his sacrifice, his pride, and his love—all combined to check the impulse.

They had arrived at a dilapidated bower, over which the ivy had scrambled until it trailed on the ground; but through the ivy an obstinate rose-tree had forced its flowers, and they in the sunlight laughed at the lovely parasite. A curtain of ivy had fallen over the door-way, and the bower had not been used for many days. In the old time when Polly was a child and Michael a schoolboy, this bower had been their favourite resort, and in it they had often played at house-keeping. Now they had grown up; life had become serious to them, and there was no more playing at housekeeping. There was no woman

about the place to take care of the bower, and it had been left to the overgrowth of the ivy and the rose-tree.

They halted instinctively, but at the moment neither remembered the happy days they had spent there: was it long ago? Or was it only yesterday? At present, it might never have been at all.

‘You must not ask, you must trust me,’ he said.

‘Then you cannot trust me!’ she said, her clear eyes fixed upon him, wide open in wonder, and her suspicions returning.

‘Ay, in anything.’

‘You take a strange way of showing that you would. I have been placed in a very awkward position; I have been told that it is my money which has been lost, and when I ask you to tell me if this is true, you answer that I must trust you.’

‘Who said that you were the loser?’

‘Mr. Walton told me.’

Michael felt as if he had been suddenly plunged into a well of ice. The spell of the ‘golden silence’ always lays hold of the tongue of deep emotion; passion speaks, for it is ephemeral; love and despair are reserved, for they are eternal.

‘I have always told you that you have lost something,’ he said, with apparent calmness; ‘we lose considerably, but not so much as to render assistance necessary. We can still go on comfortably enough, and I hope in time we shall recover all our losses. The exact amount of your loss and ours cannot be known until all the securities of the bank have been realised, but Mr. Patchett will render you an account as soon as possible. I hope this answer is sufficiently plain.’

‘Now, you are vexed with me again. I suppose the information Mr. Walton gave me was only obtained from some of those foolish rumours

which are always sent about by idle people who take a pleasure in meddling with their neighbours' private affairs. I am sorry, Michael, for having been so hasty. But why did you destroy that will?' she added abruptly, a suspicion of something wrong still lingering in her mind.

'My father destroyed it.'

'Yes, but you handed it to him, and you did not tell him what it was.'

'For the reason you have already heard—it was mere waste paper, and intended for the fire. The will which you read, and which my father has now locked up, is the right one. Is there anything more I can say?'

'Why are you so pale? Why do you speak so bitterly? Is it not right that when such a story comes to my ears I should ask you for an explanation, since I dare not trouble Uncle Job?'

'Yes, quite right. Was I speaking bitterly?—then it was in answer to my own thoughts

rather than to you. I have told you the state of affairs as far as it can be told at present.'

He thought she was driving him too hard : he knew that she would never have acted in this way but for Walton's influence ; and, despite all his resolutions to be calm when he should learn that his rival had won the day, he could not help thinking that he deserved better treatment at her hands.

She was unable to divine the complexity of thoughts, fears, and hopes which made him look so pale, and speak so bitterly ; and so she said with some warmth :

'Yes, you have explained ; but have you told me everything ?'

He seemed to shake himself free from some stupefying cloud, and he answered deliberately :

'No ! I have not told you everything, but I have told you all that I desire you to know.'

'Then I shall ask Mr. Walton to tell me the rest.'

‘And he will certainly do everything in his power to satisfy you,’ said Walton politely, as he halted in front of them.

She could have bitten her tongue out, the moment the words were uttered, such a flash of pain passed over Michael’s face; and the inopportune arrival of Walton intensified her remorse.

CHAPTER XXXII.

‘I WAS WAITING FOR YOU.’

‘I AM sorry to interrupt your *tête-à-tête*, but I came to the conclusion that you had forgotten that I was waiting for you, Miss Holt, and that you had started for home across the fields. But wishing to make sure that you had done so before driving back to the Meadow—for you know I couldn’t very well have gone home with your trap—I at last drove up to the house. I was told that you had gone into the garden with the young master, and I followed on purpose to enliven your conversation with a little discord. Pardon my impatience; I see that my presence was unnecessary, and that my kindly intentions are quite thrown away. I have been waiting exactly

two hours and ten minutes—a fair spell for one who has not the slightest pretension to any degree of Griselda's special virtue.'

He spoke with his customary air of nonchalance, and, with some measure of amusement, he watched the two bewildered faces before him; he saw how Michael's darkened, and how Polly's passed through the phases of an April day.

'It is true, Mr. Walton, I had forgotten that you were waiting. Excuse me; the importance of the business we have had to discuss was the cause. I regret that you should have been put to so much inconvenience.'

'Pray, don't mention it—I am ready to do anything to oblige you. I dare say you have not concluded your business yet, and since I know you are still here, I shall retire and wait till to-morrow if you like.'

Polly could not decide whether he was sneering at her or making fun of her. She was angry with him. Michael spoke:

‘Our business is finished, Mr. Walton. As you are aware, it is with you Miss Holt desires to speak now.’

He was so pale and calm that both Polly and Walton felt uncomfortable: the fact that she had come there secretly with Walton, that he had been waiting for her all this time, was like the last straw which broke the camel Hope’s back. Walton, however, was not one to be easily disturbed by anything: main force might press his cork-nature under water for a time, but it slipped through the fingers and was up again dancing on the surface as if nothing had happened.

‘Just so,’ he said coolly, ‘you were both too much engaged to notice me coming along, and I heard Miss Holt say that she intended to ask me something. I can only repeat that it will afford me the greatest pleasure to give her any information I possess.’

Walton was able to make a fair guess at the

position of affairs, and his present idea was to upset Michael by an audacious assumption of a perfectly confidential understanding with Polly. So far as Michael was concerned, he succeeded; but with Polly he did worse than fail—he roused in her a feeling of indignation. His levity at such a moment was contemptible; his assumption of familiarity was irritating. This did not help Michael, for he appeared to be wickedly silent, giving her no aid in her honest attempt to read the riddle rightly. The two men, in fact, seemed to be pitted against her, each wishing her to believe what would suit his own purpose. The practical way in which she usually looked at things stood her in good stead now. She gathered up all her strength, and spoke with a fair appearance of business-like decision.

‘You, Mr. Walton, tell me that I am almost, if not quite, ruined by the failure of the bank; you, Michael, tell me that my loss is not of much

consequence. You cannot both be right—I want to know who is wrong.’

She looked straight at Michael, as if eager that he should speak first. He answered the look rather than the words :

‘I have nothing further to say.’

She turned to Walton.

‘Strange to say, so far as I can make out, we are both right. I don’t know what Hazell may have told you, but if he denies that the money lost was yours, then . . . Well, then, he can arrange the matter with his father and his own conscience.’

‘Tell him that he is wrong,’ implored Polly.

Michael was silent.

‘Tell him that he is wrong,’ she cried again, passionately ; ‘if you have ever cared for me, tell him that he is mistaken—that you have not tried to deceive me. . . Oh, Michael, do speak !’

The man almost trembled : her dear eyes seemed to be full of love as she made the appeal ;

she seemed to be offering him a last chance of winning her. But he was affronted by being thus driven into a corner by Walton. The consciousness that he had done all in kindness to her made him the more keenly sensitive to the humiliation of the position, and the more stubborn in his resolve to say nothing. He had sacrificed his fortune for her, and if he had perpetrated a crime he could not have been worse abused. But she had conjured with the potent spell—'if you ever cared for me!' Had it been used when they were alone he would have told all, and given his reasons—perfectly sound and simple ones, he was convinced—for acting as he had done. But Walton was there, and so Michael:

'Mr. Walton has told you that he is right and that I am right. He is most considerate; and as he has apparently come to a knowledge of our private affairs which I thought only my father, Mr. Patchett, and myself possessed, I leave him to give you the explanation with which

he has professed his readiness to favour you. It will please him to do so, and it will relieve me. I did hope that you might never be troubled with the details of this unfortunate business—or at least that you might not learn them until circumstances had rendered you indifferent to them. But Mr. Walton is too clever for me. Whether he has acted an honest part in spying into my affairs and making use of his keyhole discoveries to my prejudice, you and he can decide for yourselves.'

That was the bitterest speech Michael had ever made, and his calmness added emphasis to it. Walton's cheeks grew white when he was thus deliberately charged with spying and making keyhole discoveries. A hasty movement on his part was checked by Polly's upraised hand.

'Then, it is true!' she said excitedly; 'you have deceived me—you told me a falsehood when you assured me that my loss was of small account?'

'I told you what is true,' was the firm response, and there was a tender sadness in the tone, despite the harshness of the accusation—most harsh coming from her lips and in Walton's presence.

'Since Mr. Hazell will not satisfy me, I ask you, Mr. Walton, to give me a full explanation in his presence.'

'I cannot give you a full explanation, and the matter is one requiring some more authentic information than can be given by an outsider. Hazell is telling you the truth, of course, but not all the truth. That is why his statement does not precisely agree with mine. He does not tell you why he is able to persist in saying that your loss is inconsiderable. The *if* and all that follows it are omitted. He is, in fact, hiding his light under a bushel in order that it may shine forth with the more brilliance when the time comes.'

Walton calculated rightly that the sneer would have the effect of making his rival more stubborn

than ever, and he was glad of an opportunity to hit him back.

Polly began to guess vaguely at what Michael was trying to do, and in her present mood she was not grateful; for she could only make out that, with mistaken kindness, he had endeavoured to keep her in ignorance of the extent of her losses. She could not know that he had replaced her fortune with his own, leaving himself comparatively poor that she might still be happy in the thought that she was well off, and free to choose her husband without being encumbered by any sense of obligation to him. Even if such a wild idea had entered her head, she would have felt sure that Job would have put a stop to such nonsense at once. She did not know how the old man's love of money had been overcome by the greater love of his son; how Michael had pleaded and argued until Job came to believe that the only way of achieving the object dearest to him—the marriage—was by leaving Polly to

imagine that she had lost little whilst they had lost nearly all; how Michael had proved to him—as he had proved to himself—that if the matter were taken into a court of law the trustee would be compelled to refund the money; and how every chance of winning Polly would be lost if any question of this kind should arise. She did not know how Job's affection for her had made him ready to do anything which would spare her trouble, especially seeing that it made no difference, since when the two wedded it was of no consequence from which side the money came. Then, as the marriage was postponed from time to time, there was the slow but steady growth of suspicion in the old man's mind that Michael was too soft to take care of himself, and that Walton, or some one like him, would carry off the prize in spite of all the care he had taken to carry out her father's wishes and his own. Out of this fear rose the cry for Patchett and the new will in which he stated the whole case, believing that,

when she clearly understood it, Polly would deal justly by Michael even if she should fail to take him for her husband.

It was that will which Job had destroyed, his son having given it to him for a pipelight.

She had no notion of the depth of torture to which he had subjected himself for her sake, and which the combination of pride, rejected love, and the fear of paining her, prevented him from revealing. But she saw that there was anguish in his face, whatever the cause, and she grasped his arm kindly.

‘Once more, Michael, will you not speak? I cannot believe that you would attempt to deceive me, and yet all that you are doing forces that horrible thought upon me.’

The touch thrilled through him. He was uncertain what to say: she misunderstood his hesitation, and gradually withdrew her hand. At that he felt like one who, drowning, has touched the side of a steep rock, but, being too exhausted

to avail himself of its aid, slips slowly back into the deadly embrace of the turbulent waves.

'You will not speak! I shall go to Patchett, then. He cannot refuse to explain my own affairs to me, and I am determined to learn all about them.'

'Patchett is the man,' said Walton briskly; 'he will tell you the truth in this case, although he is a lawyer.'

'As you please.' (Michael was uncomfortably calm as he spoke.) 'I have asked you to trust me; but since you find that impossible, I should say that Mr. Patchett would be the best person from whom you could seek advice.'

'You leave me no alternative. I want you to be clear about that, Michael. I am doing this because I see no other way of arriving at an understanding of what my position is in the strange hobble we have got into.'

She expected him even yet to save her the journey; but he only bowed as if in entire sub-

mission to her will; and through all her excitement she began to feel that she was doing him a wrong somehow, in spite of her exasperation at his obstinate reserve. If there was anything to tell, why could he not speak out? She did not make allowance for the evil effect of the presence of Walton. The latter spoke:

‘Jim is ready. But before we start, Hazell, I would like you to know that my information came to me unsought, and was not obtained through any keyhole. I have used it to my advantage, certainly, and so would you have done.’

‘It is quite possible, sir, for we never know how we may act until we are driven to it. So long as Miss Holt approves of your way of dealing with this matter, I have no right and no desire to object.’

Polly had walked on, with quick and yet undecided steps. If she could only have spoken to Michael alone, she had no doubt that he


would have made the whole difficulty plain to her ; but he was annoyed about something, and would not give her a chance. She supposed it was jealousy that made him act so queerly, and woman-like, whilst she wished that he would not be jealous, she could not say that she was displeased at having made him so. Walton in this respect sunk in her esteem ; for he always appeared to be too self-assured to be capable of jealousy. In many ways, however, that might be the most convenient humour to find in a husband.

But she was not satisfied with herself, and she was still less satisfied with Walton. She doubted the propriety of allowing him to drive her into the village, his horse in her wagonette, too, remembering the effect produced on the occasion when she had allowed him to drive her out of it. But she would not ask Michael to go with her ; and being in haste, it would have been folly to have proposed to walk, whilst to ask

Walton to do so would have been still more ridiculous. Besides, the time was not one in which she could allow herself to be guided by any squeamish propriety. She was therefore again committed to Walton's care.

Michael's calm bearing seemed to render him the less approachable. She was asking herself over and over again, 'Was it a quarrel? would they ever make it up? Was she doing wrong? Was he right?' and so on. His quiet politeness was more offensive to her than any reproaches he might have uttered could have been. He assisted her into the wagonette and said 'Good day,' as he would have done if she had been any ordinary visitor. He even shook hands with Walton, but in saying 'Good-bye,' there was a decision in the tone suggesting that he did not expect to see him there again.

'Good-bye,' said Walton, looking back as the horse started; 'I hope we shall all be in better humour when we meet next time.'



He gave Jim his head, and he went off at a fine pace—Walton chuckling even at that moment at the idea of how Michael must be envying him the possession of such a horse. Bones followed with his stump of a tail in the air like a flag of triumph. Ted had run out to make friends with him on his arrival, but, after a contemptuous sniff, Bones had sat down to wait for his master, paying no heed to the gambols of the lively terrier. Ted gave a parting bark, and then, seeing his master standing quite still, he sat up, begging him quite plainly to come in to dinner, which had been ready for some time.

Michael watched them driving down the green lane, and his gaze remained fixed in the same direction long after they had disappeared. He noted that Polly had not once lifted her head to look back, although, as she was seated in the hind part of the vehicle, she might easily have done so. He saw Walton triumphantly flourishing his whip, flicking leaves off the hedge or

trees, and bending backward occasionally to say something to Polly. It was a small satisfaction to the man in his distress to observe that she appeared to pay no heed to her companion's remarks. Still, she did not look back; she did not give him any sign by which he could divine that she desired the rupture to be healed.

Was it really all over, then, and so quietly? What had been said—what done? He did not think that he had been unduly stern, and his reticence was on her account. Still, when she laid so much stress upon it, why might he not have taken her quietly aside and told her everything? The answer flashed through his brain sharply—because Walton was there, and she had refused to trust him.

He did not go in to dinner; he sent a message to his father, and went into the stables, Ted following, and no doubt in his own way thinking there must be something the matter with the clock, since dinner was neglected.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

‘OUR DOUBTS ARE TRAITORS.’

MICHAEL was mistaken; she had glanced back several times, but she could do that without raising her head. The sight of the sad, motionless figure watching her as she passed away from him—was it to be for ever?—and the remembrance of the old man so near his end, who was crying to her to complete the hope of his life, made her heart ache. How fast the horse was going! how quickly Michael and the house had disappeared! She strained her eyes to catch glimpses of the farm buildings as she was being whirled along the road, as if she would never see them again. She did not reply to Walton’s observations, for she had not heard them.

She had fallen into a dreamy, dazed condition of mind. It was all so strange. She had often quarrelled with Michael before, and they had parted in anger; but it was quite different just now, for they had parted in sorrow, as if reconciliation were impossible. And to what was it all due? To Walton in the first instance, it seemed; to her own impetuosity in the second. She had read in legends of agreeable demons who had carried off silly damsels to destruction, having obtained power over them through their vanity or other weakness. In this half-dream Walton was the agreeable fiend, and Bones, trotting behind, with his black eye and grinning white teeth, was invested with all the qualities of an attendant imp ready to do the behest of his wicked master.

She smiled at the fantasy, and looking up saw that they had entered the Earl's Park, and Walton was driving so quietly now that the deer were scarcely disturbed; the greater number of

them did not observe the passers, a few turned timid eyes upon them, and one royal stag with antlers high in the air trotted off towards the dell, but leisurely, as if conscious of his immunity. The warmth of the afternoon sun rendered the shade of the dense foliage of the beeches, limes, and oaks which lined the avenue on either side, very grateful to the occupants of the wagonette.

'We may as well take it quietly here,' said Walton, turning towards her, 'so that you may have time to make up your mind as to what you are going to do. I thought you would like to come this way, as it is quieter than the high road.'

'That was considerate, thank you. I am afraid I have been very stupid during the last half-hour.'

'You can't help being upset, I know; but I hope you are not angry with me.'

He had restrained Jim's pace to a walk.

‘No, Mr. Walton, please do not think that. You did what you believed to be a service to me, and I am obliged to you. I am only angry with myself for acting so hastily. I ought to have given Michael some warning that I was coming to ask him about the money. He meant kindly ; he wanted to save me from worry, and I took him unfairly by surprise in pouncing upon him the way I did to-day. He asked me to trust him, too, and by-and-by he would explain everything ; but I was impatient, and would not wait. Do you think you could forgive me if I treated you so badly ?’

‘Oh, *I* could forgive you anything ; I doubt if Hazell could.’ Walton did not at all relish the way in which she was exaggerating her own offence and condoning Michael’s conduct ; and so he went on : ‘ He is the most stubborn mule of a fellow I ever came across. If there was anything to tell us which we did not already know, he could have told it, and saved the bother of apply-

ing to Patchett. If there was nothing, he could easily have said so.’

‘But he said to me, *Wait*; he may have reasons—and if he has, I am sure they are kindly ones—for wishing to say nothing more at present.’

Walton pulled up the horse with a jerk; and the halt was made under the shadow of a broad-spreading cedar whose dark-green shelves formed a delightful roof, protecting those underneath from every ray of the sun.

‘Then, why do you not wait? Why go on to Patchett, when you still desire to believe that Hazell is acting rightly in this matter?’

‘You said that he was right.’

‘And so he was and is. The matter is quite simple, and I give him all credit for the good-nature which prompted him to take this course. He says you have lost nothing, because he believes that you will become his wife, and then his fortune will make up for yours. It is a

trick ; he knows that it is so, and that is why he is shy of speaking out ; that is why I said he had left out the *if*. What he means is, that if you take him you will be all right. He persuades himself, I have not the least doubt, that under these conditions he is perfectly justified in saying that your losses are of small importance.'

It was very bewildering, and such a course of conduct would be very mean on Michael's part. She could not believe him capable of it ; yet it was all so plausible, and Walton was evidently so straightforward in what he said and did, that the balance of proof certainly weighed in favour of his suggestion. It was natural enough that Michael should even regard their marriage as a complete settlement of the difficulty. She had never given him authority to hold her as engaged to him ; he had never pretended to that position, although Job had all along insisted upon it. On her guardian's account, she had during the last few weeks made no deliberate protest against his

continual cry for the marriage; and probably Michael thought that her submission in this respect meant more than she intended. And yet, did she not intend him to believe that by and by she would consent? She did not know: the recollection of him standing looking after her as his rival drove her away, made her sensible that parting with him would cost her more than she had hitherto imagined.

'We had better go on now,' she said after a long pause; 'I must see Mr. Patchett.'

'We shall start at once, but, before we start, am I to have no word of hope? I do think you would have preferred to remain in your fool's paradise, Polly, and that you are vexed with me for having roused you from it.'

'No, you have done what was your duty if you think of me as a friend; you have enabled me to discover my real position. I am grateful to you for that, although I am sorry that there should be occasion for it. I have a sincere feeling of

friendship for you, Mr. Walton, and I speak as frankly as I can. If my friendship is of any value in your eyes, you will drive on at once without asking me to say more.'

Jim was off at a gallop almost before she had done speaking, and the trees flew past her like the changing figures in a rapidly turned kaleidoscope. Walton's lips were tightly closed and his features hard set: if he had been driving for a wager he could not have given more attention to his horse. He was perfectly honest in his theory of Michael's conduct; only, it had never dawned upon him that he could give up Polly and his fortune too. He had a very fair appreciation of human nature; such a sacrifice as that was a stage beyond his vision.

As he helped Polly to descend at the lawyer's door, he said hurriedly:

'In speaking to Patchett you may as well tell him that my information is derived from the copy of a letter of old Hodsoll's. Patchett can

see the copy, but I am unable to tell him whence it comes. My sister gave it to me to use as I pleased, but she refused to tell me under any circumstances where she got it.'

Polly went into the office, where three young men were busily occupied with a sporting paper which was hastily thrown aside on her entrance, and they appeared to be so engrossed in copying sundry legal documents that she obtained no attention until she had spoken twice. Then she was informed that Mr. Patchett had gone to London, and would not return for two days; but if her business were of importance, perhaps she would confer with Mr. Lee. A brief message was sent through a speaking-tube—the young man performed the operation as impressively as possible—and she was conducted to the room of Mr. Patchett's confidential clerk. Mr. Lee was in every respect the reverse of his principal. He was a little, thin man, of about thirty years, with dark hair, mild grey eyes, and white sunken

cheeks, suggestive of consumption. He was particular in his dress, very subdued and thoughtful in his manner: he would have made an admirable undertaker, was the first impression produced by his appearance.

He placed a chair for her, and then, resting his elbow on the arms of his own chair, the tips of his fingers met forming an arch, and he waited to learn her business.

‘I shall not take up much of your time, Mr. Lee; I wished to ask Mr. Patchett to give me a statement of the amount which I have lost by the failure of the County Bank.’

‘Certainly, Miss Holt, in a day or two you can have as correct a statement as we are able to give at present. Mr. Hazell was here a few minutes ago, and informed me that you would call; indeed, he seemed to think that you might have been here before him.’

‘Mr. Hazell!’ she exclaimed in blank astonishment.

'Yes, I am surprised that you did not meet him: it is not more than ten minutes since he was here. He gave me the same instructions as you have given about the preparation of the accounts, and then he wrote a private letter to Mr. Patchett which we are to send off by this evening's post. I should mention that you are one of our clients to whose affairs Mr. Patchett gives his personal attention.'

'Then you cannot explain to me how I am affected by the failure?'

'I am sorry to be obliged to say I cannot in Mr. Patchett's absence. But so far as I understand it, you are in a very fortunate position compared with that of many of our clients.'

'Will you let me know when Mr. Patchett returns as soon as you can?'

'You would be certain to find him here at twelve o'clock on Friday. I shall make a memorandum that you are to call on that day,

and should there be any alteration in his plans I will inform you.'

She thanked him, and Mr. Lee solemnly bowed her out.

She had not gained much satisfaction so far, but she was struck by the information that Mr. Lee considered her fortunate compared with other clients, and that Michael had been there before her. He must have ridden hard to accomplish that, notwithstanding the delay in the Earl's Park; and his doing so was a curious circumstance in itself; it suggested that he had some reason for desiring to forestall her interview with the lawyer.

As they drove along she told Walton no more than that Patchett was from home, and she could not see him until Friday. But she was haunted all the way by thoughts of Michael's strange conduct. She was more tired when she reached home than she had been by the hardest day's work she had ever known. Consequently she did not



'She sobbed bitterly.'



see how pale and nervous Sarah was on their arrival.

Walton had recovered from his chagrin at the answer he had received in the Park, but he excused himself from staying longer than was necessary to allow Jim to be taken out of the wagonette and the saddle put on. Sarah quickly went in search of some one to do this, and found young Carter in the rick-yard. Although she bade him hurry up to the house, she walked very slowly herself. Thus, Polly and Walton were alone in the parlour.

'I shall come on Saturday for your answer, Polly,' he said; 'you will then have seen Patchett, and you will have had a night to think over what he says. Surely then you will be able to make up your mind as to what you are to do.'

'I will try,' she answered wearily, as she took off her hat, and abstractedly smoothed the edges of her hair with her fingers. 'I am so put out by all that has happened since the morning

that I am not able to think about anything just now.'

'You want a rest; you will be all right in the morning. Don't worry: whatever you have lost, you are not ruined, and, if you were, the Abbey can always afford bread and cheese.' She was grateful for the genuine affection he displayed; she would have been pained by the consciousness of her own inability to requite it; but in the prospect of bread and cheese and Walton Abbey the figure of Miss Walton appeared, and she almost smiled.

'You are very kind, Mr. Walton, and you make me feel very ungracious; for even if I could have thought of you as you wish me to do, I should say no, and refuse to see you again, should affairs prove to be as you represent them.'

'That is cruel.'

'I mean to be grateful and kind.'

'We shall see all about it on Saturday,' he

said gaily, for there was a gentleness in her manner towards him she had never displayed before.

She was glad to be left alone. She had laughed at Sarah for losing her appetite, and prayed that she might be saved from love if that were the effect of it; but her own time had come, and she could not eat, although she had tasted nothing since breakfast. She took a strong cup of tea, and, saying that she was so tired she must have a rest, went up to her own room.

Seated by the window, her elbow resting on the ledge, and her cheek on her knuckles, she looked out vacantly, unconscious of the glories of the setting sun. By and by she took from her pocket the pipelight she had made for Uncle Job, and slowly unfolded it, pressing it out flat on the window ledge. That Walton had acted honestly there was no doubt; that Michael had done so was beyond question; then, how was it

that such confusion should exist in their statements? The scrap of paper under her hand might be the key to the puzzle. The writing was perfectly plain; but the paper had been torn aslant, and not one sentence was complete.

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this money; but it is the wish of my son

be done. I have consented to this because I beli

Mary Holt will marry him. If she does not I desire that

these particulars of the investment in order that she may

towards my son Michael and do him justice as her conscience

shall direct.

She tried to smooth down the ragged edges and to make out the broken words, so that she

might obtain some definite idea of what had been the meaning of this passage in the burnt will. That it had important reference to herself was quite clear, but what the reference was she was unable to comprehend further than that there was something in which her guardian expected her to do justice to Michael in the event of her not marrying him.

Then, Michael *was* concealing something from her; and it was something to which his father consented without approving of it, and only in the belief that the marriage would soon be an accomplished fact. If she did not marry him, then Uncle Job wished her to know the particulars about some investment, so that she might be in a position to do justice to Michael.

'How can I do that without knowing what is required of me? He asks me to trust him; why can he not trust me?'

She could not find any answer to that very natural question; and puzzling over those dis-

jointed phrases, which plainly indicated a hidden calamity of some sort, she felt very sick and sore at heart. On Friday she would undoubtedly learn enough from Mr. Patchett to guide her ; but in the mean while she was to suffer all the pangs of distress consequent upon knowing that there was a serious difficulty before her, the nature of which she could only vaguely imagine. Michael could have relieved her at once by only a few words, and he would not utter them. It was cruel of him : yet she was not indignant, for she knew that his purpose was to spare her pain, and she was sad in remembering the way they had parted.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

ASKING PARDON.

ACCORDING to Michael's view, there was nothing extraordinary in his conduct. As he watched her being driven away by Walton from the place which he had so long dreamed would be her home, he believed that Polly was lost to him. Her action showed that she preferred Walton's guidance to his: it showed not only that she would not trust him, but that she distrusted him. Otherwise she would at least have asked him to go with her. Well, as she had made her choice, it could not matter how soon the mystery about the money was revealed, and the revelation would be a relief to him. The secret had become oppressive. He was almost sorry now that he had

caused his father to burn the will containing the details of the transaction ; but he wished her to believe that the action was spontaneous on his father's part, and not the result of his arguments and resolute declaration that in any case the money would be restored to her.

He had done no wrong to any one, unless it might be himself: all the legacies remained exactly as they were before: it was entirely out of his own fortune that Polly's losses were to be recouped. He had contributed largely to the accumulation of Job's store by the hard work of his brain and hands; the money which he gave to her had been set aside for him, and he had a right to deal with it as seemed best to him, This course would leave him poor, with the world to begin again, as his father said.

'I feel that this is right, dad, and I must do it,' was always the answer; 'I have youth and strength, and I have no fear of the upshot. At any rate, I would rather give my last sixpence,

and take my place in the field as an ordinary labourer, than that anybody should say Job Hazell had not dealt fairly by the girl who had been placed under his care.'

That always touched Job keenly; but even that would not have overcome his craving for the money, if it had not appeared to him that the marriage would make all safe for Michael. Then had come his terrible yearning to see the two wedded at once; oddly combined with his conviction that he was utterly ruined, and his eager desire to work that he might retrieve his losses.

As these symptoms of rapidly failing powers appeared, Michael's conscience was more and more sharply smitten by the thought of the exaggerations of which he had been guilty in order to persuade his father to adopt his plans, and especially by the concealment of his doubts as to the probability of Polly becoming his wife. He hoped that she would, and by that flattering unctious he tried to soothe his troubled con-

science ; but he suffered terribly during the weeks which followed the failure of the bank and this day on which he had committed something very like a crime. True, she had aided him in the deception, and in so doing had fanned his hope into a flame, for he had not pressed her in any way ; he had been even more reserved than usual, and she had not told him that he was wrong in presuming that her desire to humour Uncle Job had nothing to do with him.

And now—? It was all over. There was no further necessity for considering what she might do out of gratitude, no further possibility that such a feeling could make her accept him when she wished to marry somebody else. She had decided, and it was now for him to act promptly, so that she might be spared unnecessary trouble and his father be as little disturbed as possible. Therefore he had saddled his mare and ridden fast to the village, taking the high road, and thus avoiding Polly and Walton, who had gone by the

Park. Riding at full gallop, he could have distanced them even if they had not tarried on the way ; as it was, he had time to spare.

Patchett being from home, he gave Mr. Lee directions for the preparation of accounts. The private letter to the former contained no higher treason than the assertion that the last-made will had been destroyed by his father in the presence of Miss Holt, and an earnest request that, as the direct evidence of his share in the arrangement of the transfer of the money from his account to Polly's had been removed, Mr. Patchett would say as little as he could about it to Miss Holt. He (Michael) wished her to believe that the action was entirely his father's. At the same time, Miss Holt was to have all necessary information ; his desire being simply that she might be secured from all loss without any sense of obligation to him.

This task accomplished, he endeavoured to force his thoughts back to the common affairs of

his daily life. He rode down to the station to enquire about the arrival of a wagon-load of guano and a new reaping machine which, according to the invoices, were due that afternoon. Here he was detained for half-an-hour, and a second time escaped an encounter with Polly and Walton.

On reaching home, Jane Darby, who had been watching for him with much anxiety, told him that 'Master was queerer nor he had ever been yet.'

'In what way, Jane?'

'It's every way. He won't eat nothing, and he's been a-calling for you and for Polly all afternoon since you went out. He won't smoke almost, though he's tried it. Hadn't you best send to the Meadow, for I don't believe anything'll quiet him, barrin' seeing you and she together.'

There were tears in the woman's eyes, and Jane Darby was not much given to the display

of emotion. She waited on the threshold when Michael went into the room, and she heard all that passed.

Michael found his father feverishly taking up and laying down his letters and other papers. The dinner-plates were standing untouched at the other end of the table, for Job would only allow the cloth to be spread on one half of it, in order that his desk and papers should remain undisturbed. His eyes were sunken, and there was a peculiar dazed expression in them which the son feared although he did not understand.

‘That’s you, Michael, lad ; finished the home-field, I suppose—eh ? That new machine’s a good un. Told you it was the thing to have—reaping and tedding all in one ; capital, eh ? . . Where’s Polly ? You went out with her a minute ago, didn’t you ? Ah, and I saw you linking along past the window. Lucky chap ! A fine wench—and it’ll be all right about the money. She took it quiet, didn’t she ? Of

course, because it makes no difference to her or you either when you're married. Where is she?'

'She'll be here before long, dad—what are you looking for?'

The old man's hands continued nervously the work of lifting and laying down the papers, every movement more feeble than the one before.

'It's dark, ain't it? Light the lamp.'

'I'll fetch it, dad.'

He went out hurriedly. He told the weeping Darby to get the lamp, and then he went in search of two messengers; one man was sent off on the mare to ask the Doctor to come, at once, and another was despatched with the dog-cart to the Meadow. He helped to saddle the mare, and to harness the horse in the dog-cart. Then he wrote in pencil on the inside of an old envelope, 'Please come with the bearer. My father is calling for you. He is dangerously ill.'

This occupied almost a quarter of an hour, and when he re-entered the room the lamp was



'His head drooped, and his last breath was drawn.'

burning at full blaze, although it was still daylight, and Darby was holding it up as if to permit Job to see the characters on the paper which he held in his hands. The desk was open, its contents tossed about as if in a hasty search for something ; and the hands with the paper had dropped upon the old man's knees.

The paper was the will, and it was the last page which Job had been reading when his head drooped and his last breath was drawn.

Michael understood it all ; and it was only a whisper, but so full of agony :

‘ God forgive me ! I have killed him.’

CHAPTER XXXV.

THAT TERRIBLE 'IF!'

THE stillness of the place was terrible. To the spellbound man and woman the even-song of the birds seemed to be hushed, and what murmurs of life out of doors reached their ears only intensified the silence in the room.

Job was still drooping over the paper which had revealed to him the treachery of his son; the thin white hair straggled across his brow, and the glazed eyes appeared as if vainly searching for the absent words. Jane Darby held up the blazing lamp, the light of which, struggling with that of the closing day, cast faint shadows on the table and the walls. After that whispered prayer for pardon, the heart stricken son stood

like one paralysed: he felt that he had been guilty of parricide.

The intellect, however, was soon painfully active, although the emotions were benumbed, and he roused himself to perform the sad duties necessary in this dark hour. But he acted like one in a dream; his movements were so calm and mechanical that no casual observer would have suspected how his whole nature was being racked. He was tortured by that awful 'If' which enters into the life of everyone with such a huge measure of regrets for what might have been—the possible is always so large, and the good work accomplished so small. 'If' he had done this—'if' he had cut down that—what a difference there would have been now! His father might have been alive. 'If' he could only begin again! What a great portion of our lives is disturbed by lamentations over blunders which, looking bitterly back, we see might have been so easily avoided!

Michael had known that in the course of nature he could not expect his father to live long—that the days, almost the hours, were numbered; he had been warned by many symptoms that the final scene would take place soon. And yet it had come upon him with appalling suddenness and found him quite unprepared. His love had blinded him to the imminence of the event; and in his love he had in a vague way hoped and expected that his father had still years before him, provided he could be kept quiet and saved from every source of disturbance.

How eagerly he had tried to guard him! During this day especially Michael's strength and wit had been taxed to their limits in his endeavour to save him. He had apparently succeeded in averting the explanation which he knew would be most perilous, and in the moment of success this climax of grief fell upon him. Conscience called out 'Guilty,' and he was too feeble in his sorrow to attempt any defence even

to himself. His father was dead, and he had killed him. This was the exaggeration of grief, but for the time he could not understand that.

He saw how it had come about. Moved by some fear or suspicion that his wishes were not to be fulfilled, the father had sought comfort in reassuring himself that the statement in the will was perfectly clear, and that Polly must consent to accept Michael. Then he had discovered that he had burned the will containing the explanation; and whether he believed that it had been given to him by mistake or design could never be known now. The shock of anger and sorrow had done its work.


Whilst Darby was pulling down all the blinds Michael carried his father upstairs and laid him on the bed. Then he returned to the parlour to gather up the scattered papers. He carefully folded them one by one and replaced them in the desk, the will uppermost. He learned that his father had thought of death, as on a half-sheet

of note-paper was written in his scrawling but laborious penmanship:

‘This is what I want put on my stone when the time comes, and I look to my son Michael to see that it is done according to my wishes.

‘Here lies Job Hazell farmer at Marshstead for years. Aged years. Peace be with YOU. I go to Peace.’

Job had arranged this epitaph on the afternoon of the last Sunday on which he had been to church, and he had regarded it in secret as a masterpiece of composition. Odd as it was, Michael resolved that it should be cut on the stone as it had been written, with only the addition of punctuation and the filling-up of the blanks—fifty-one years for the occupation of the farm, and seventy-five for the age. Was there nothing else he could do to please him? Now that he had gone away, the son remembered so many neglected opportunities of giving him pleasure; many trifling items of disobedience rose



up like accusing ghosts; but the great wrong he had done this day transcended all others in its results and in his remorse.

For himself he had no pity: a dull aching cry was in his brain—'There can be no atonement now.' He was afraid to think of Polly, and yet the dear face was always before him. It was his love for her that had tempted him; and believing that she had accepted Walton, he feared to be unjust to her in these first moments of his anguish. He covered his eyes with his hands, trying to shut her out altogether from his thoughts. She who had been more to him than all the world, for whom he had been ready to sacrifice home and fortune, had proved his evil genius and made him a criminal.

Polly was still in her own room puzzling over that fragment of the burnt will, when the messenger arrived with Michael's startling summons. There was some strange association in her mind

between the fragment of the will and the message which distressed her, because she found it impossible to make out exactly what it was—like a name or a face which haunts the memory but will not take definite form.


She rose at once in obedience to the call, eager to comfort Uncle Job and, if it might be, to relieve Michael of some of the cares inevitable in such a calamity as seemed to be close at hand.

‘Put on your hat and come with me,’ she said hastily to Sarah, who was at the foot of the stairs; ‘we shall very likely both be wanted.’

‘Is he so very ill?’

‘Michael says dangerously ill, and he is not likely to say that without good reason; and, besides, things have happened to-day which may have upset uncle; and poor Michael, I don’t know what we can do for him. Be quick!’

She found him at the door waiting for her: so white and haggard that she scarcely recog-



nised in him the fresh, strong man she had known barely a month ago.

'I knew you would come,' he said gently; 'but it is too late.'

Then Polly with her two hands took one of his very gently, and all that she could say was :

'Oh, Michael !'

Sarah, when she heard the fatal words 'too late,' held back, watching the two mourners with sympathy and pity. But there was something else in her expression—a speculation which had nothing to do with them.

They could not speak any more at present : there seemed to be nothing more for them to say. Michael took the two ladies into the house; and it was with a feeling of inexpressible awe that Polly stood in the room where only a few hours ago she had been talking with her guardian, and now looked at the empty chair which he would never occupy again. She wondered how it was that Michael could be so quiet, and that she her-

self was incapable of making any sign of the sorrow she felt. What seemed most strange was that the dreaded event had actually occurred and they stood there so calm, so helpless. All the kindness of the old man was flickering through her mind and filling her eyes with tears. The sharp edges of his character had disappeared, and the petty weaknesses, at which she had so often laughed whilst pretending not to see them, were forgotten. To those who love the dead one the mirror of memory reflects only the most pleasing features of the life.

It was her first real experience of death; for she could scarcely remember her mother, and when her father died she was still too young for her emotions to be deeply impressed. She had cried a great deal and felt greatly afflicted; but every day brought some new object of interest to occupy her mind, and the sense of loss soon passed away, leaving only an occasional touch of pain—not envious, only regretful—when she saw other

girls with loving parents at hand to advise and guide them. Uncle Job, however, had filled the place of a father; and now when he was taken away she was a woman with many vivid memories of his goodness and forbearance; and, with the eccentricity of grief, she found pleasure in thinking even of his scoldings. He had gone away, and there were no more marked symptoms of sorrow than were supplied by Michael's great reserve and gentleness, by the white faces and the hushed voices. There were no wild outbursts of excitement, no outcries of agony such as she had read of in books. Everything was done calmly and in order.

Dr. Humphreys arrived, and Michael was called away to see him, just as Polly had said :

'Is there *nothing* I can do, Michael?'

And he could only answer, 'Nothing now.'

The Doctor was not surprised to learn that he could render no further service to his patient. He went through the formality of making the

usual examination, and announcing the fact, of which everybody was aware, that life was extinct. But Dr. Humhpreys was more than a faithful and experienced medical adviser: he was the friend of his patients and their families. So, looking at Michael, he offered him friendly counsel which his professional genius enabled him to see was needed.

‘Take care of yourself, Hazell; eat as much as you can, and sleep as much as you can. I don’t want to have you on my hands. You have got this to bear, and you will bear it best if you will force yourself to go on with the ordinary duties of life. You cannot do him any good by knocking yourself up.’

Michael was unable to tell the Doctor how he valued his sympathy, but he promised to try to obey him. He could not explain the heavy weight which lay upon his conscience—the conviction that it was his act which had brought about this calamity! But the idea was always

present to him, making him morbid in his views of others as well as of himself. Oh, that terrible 'If!'

CHAPTER XXXVI.

‘QUITE SURE — TOO LATE.

ALTHOUGH he had said there was nothing for Polly to do now, the answer referred rather to the position in which they had been placed in regard to his father than to the practical domestic arrangements which had to be made for the funeral. In these matters both Polly and Sarah gave active assistance to Darby, and there were many details to occupy them during the few days which intervened.

The ceremony was to take place on Monday, and Michael performed his part in all that had to be done with a degree of outward calmness which caused everyone to remark how well he bore his loss. He wrote letters to his brothers

and sisters, and all the invitations to the funeral were addressed by himself. He went about the work in the fields, in the barn and stables, much as usual. He was obeying good Dr. Humphreys' directions, and he felt that his only safety from an utter break-down lay in persistent application to work, work, work.

The people only observed that the bright, healthy expression of his face, the pleasant smile and the hearty laugh, were gone.

'But they'll all come back,' was the hopeful view which one of the harvesters proclaimed to his comrades. 'He'll be down in the mouth for a bit, but he'll pick up in time and get a wife.'

'Lord help him if he tries to get out of it that way,' exclaimed a ruddy-faced fellow, who looked as if he had never known a care in the world. 'I've been married twice.'

'But you shan't have a third chance, Ben,' retorted his wife, who was behind him, as he

knew, and who looked as ruddily good-natured as her husband.

‘Not if you can help it, old woman ; but there’s no saying what may come about.’

The group of harvesters enjoyed the passage at arms which followed between the man and wife, who were known to be as contented a couple as could be found in the county.

Jane Darby took a gloomy view of the case, and to Zachy Rowe, who was delivering letters of condolence, she gave her confidence.

‘It ain’t natural to see him as he is ; he’s just like a sick lamb, and the more people worry him the gentler he grows. There ain’t no life in him. I can’t abear to see him, when people are blundering and taking advantage of him, speaking as mild as if it was him that was in fault, and not them. I say it ain’t natural ; but the Lord’s will be done.’

Zachy shook his head wisely.

‘Human nature’s a queer business, taken

altogether and anyhow you look at it, Missus Darby. I know a lot of it—specially what's situated ten miles round Dunthorpe. A man like me, that's been going the round for ages and has eyes to see, sees a deal more nor people suppose. I can tell as easy as if I read it when a girl gets a love-letter. There ain't no waiting at the door: it bangs open afore I get up to it, and there she is pretending that it was accident and she was just going out for a walk. I know when it's an account, for there ain't no hurry about them; no more there is about funerals. I see a letter and I see a face, and then I know whether it's good or bad news. There's som'at else in Master Michael's trouble nor the old man going off sudden. That was to be expected, and needn't have knocked him down so awful. Ain't there something else?'

'I don't know of anything.'

'Then I do.' And Zachy was as proud of his superior knowledge as Darby was anxious to

learn what it was; but he did not give his confidence without some token of flattery and pressure.

‘You are a cute chap, Mr. Rowe, and clever at making out things. I wish you could help me to find out where Master Michael is hurt, for maybe then I could do something to help him.’

‘Well, I don’t like carrying tales about, but when you ask me quite confidential like I don’t mind giving you a hint.’

‘That’s real kind of you, for you know that it would be a comfort to me to do something for him, poor dear.’

‘Then, they do say everywhere,’ began Zachy, in a solemn whisper, ‘that he and the missus of the Meadow *ought* to come together. I say nothing, but there was rare talk about him staying in the house that night, owing to them tramps—a lark, weren’t it? But now all the saying is that she has given him the slip and is going to

take up with young Master Walton of the Abbey, and that's what's making Master Hazell so queer.'

'Maybe she is, and a fool she'll be if she do, —supposing she has the chance of choosing,' exclaimed Darby warmly. She had been so long associated with the family that she entirely identified herself with its good and ill repute, and the supposed slight upon Michael roused her pride beyond the discretion she had been observing in order to learn all her gossip had to tell. 'But Master Michael ain't such a fool as to break his heart about any woman as ever lived.'

'Man is always a fool when he meddles with women—axing pardon, Missus Darby, for saying that to you. I have heard of men as have made away with themselves on account of a wench. Hope it won't be so with Master Hazell—but there's no saying. Ah, what wimen is!'

With that general exclamation Zachy trotted off to carry the news of Michael's strange ways to

the next gossip, embellished with his own interpretations.

Polly wrote to Patchett that she would postpone her visit to him until after the funeral, as she was not at present in a mood to transact business. She wrote on the Wednesday night, immediately after getting home from Marshstead, and when the note was despatched next morning she felt as if a load had been lifted from her shoulders. She was glad to have at least four clear days' respite from the revelations which Michael had so resolutely endeavoured to keep from her.

'He has done no wrong,' she was constantly saying; 'I am confident of that.' And yet those broken phrases of that scrap of the burned will were always haunting her with new suggestions as to their meaning. What troubled her most was the plain direction—she did not think of it as an appeal—that she was to do him justice in something about which she was still ignorant.

She wanted to know what it was, for she was eager to do him justice in every way that was in her power. The eagerness increased every day as she unavoidably saw more and more of the harassed and quiet face. What would she not do to see him looking bright and happy again !

She was full of the tenderest feelings towards him. Job's death had brought back with vivid sympathy the recollections of her childhood and quick passage into womanhood, Michael being always the central figure in these dear memories as her playmate, protector, and lover. She repented all the pain she had caused him, although she consoled herself with the reflection that she could not help it ; she *could* not have agreed to become his wife until she felt sure that something more than the affection begot of long association, or of a sympathetic impulse, prompted her consent. She was quite satisfied that she would still have said 'No,' even if Walton had not existed.

In his manner towards her Michael was strangely shy, if not cold. They were compelled to meet often, and with all his gentleness she fancied that he shrank from her, and took every possible means—short of absolutely running away—of avoiding being alone with her. He was afraid to be alone with her, but not, as was imagined, because she had vexed him: it was because he loved her so.

On Saturday Walton was at the Meadow, as he had promised to be; but he found Polly and Sarah absent, the first being at Marshstead, and the second away to the village. He was not afraid to go to Hazell's place, but death was always unpleasant to him, and he thought that he would rather wait than go there at present.

‘The old chap going off in this way will be so much in young Hazell's favour,’ was his reflection. ‘There will be all sorts of sentimental thoughts in her head, and she will give in to anything he proposes. Just my luck.’

He went to Elizabeth House and played billiards. Mentally he staked the success or failure of his suit on the first game. He won, and he continued to play with great spirit throughout the afternoon. His opponents one after another were astounded by his 'flukes.' He was in high glee, for he had gained in his imagination much more than they guessed.

After service on Sunday Polly again went to Marshstead, to see that all the arrangements for the next day were quite completed. Darby was standing at the top of the long lane, shading her eyes from the bright sun, and apparently on the outlook for some one. As soon as she saw Polly approaching, she advanced to meet her and the good woman was doing her best to subdue a fit of crying.

'I was waiting for you, miss,' she began eagerly when they were still two yards apart; 'there's something more than ordinary the matter with Master Michael; he hasn't taken

bite or sup this blessed day. Everybody's out to church, and there's nobody in the house but him and me.'

Here Darby sobbed like a child frightened by darkness.

'What is it, Jane?' inquired Polly in alarm.

'I don't know, miss, and that's what fears me.

He went about the place all morning with his head down and looking as old and bent-like as him as is lying up there. I don't believe he's had his clothes off the whole night.'

That was a degree of grief which she could not understand; for Darby had a very sensible theory that eating and sleeping were essential to a sound condition of mind and body.

'What has he done?'

'He just came in, white as a ghost, and though I was standing at the kitchen-door, to tell him breakfast was ready, he went by like a blind man, and straight up stairs into the room. I heard him walking about and walking about,

and all of a sudden he was quiet. I was more scared by that than by his walking about. There hasn't been a sound for more than an hour, and it's been awful. I listened at the door, miss—I couldn't help it—and there wasn't as much as the sound of a breath. By'nby I tapped at the door, for I couldn't stand it any longer; but he never answered. After a while I thought that if there was anything would make him speak it would be your name; and I tapped again, asking if you was coming to dinner; but even that didn't get a word from him. I didn't feel able to go in by myself, and I've been waiting for you to go and see what's wrong. Oh, miss! I hope it's nothing.'

Polly was pale, and quickened her steps to the house. She knocked at the bedroom door. No answer. She turned the handle and entered the darkened room. Passing so rapidly from the sunlight, her eyes were somewhat dazed, and she had to halt a moment, in order to become

accustomed to the sort of summer twilight into which the thick brown-holland blinds had transformed the brilliance of noon.

It was Polly who had arranged the apartment, and she had tried to rob death of some of its gloom by placing sweet-smelling flowers on the table, the mantelpiece, the bed, and the coffin. This had been her daily task, and she had found a sad interest in performing it; for, after the first shock of surprise and grief, she felt a satisfaction in being with Uncle Job and doing something, however trifling, for his sake. He was sleeping so calmly, and looked so much younger than when she had last seen him in life, that she lingered near him and kissed the cold lips and brow, from which the wrinkles of time and care had been all smoothed away.

Presently she was able to distinguish objects, and she saw Michael kneeling by his father's head, and so still that he seemed to be in a trance. Her touch roused him, and he looked up

with vacant eyes, in which intelligence slowly dawned. He rose wearily.

'It's you, Polly,' he said softly as he covered the face. 'I did not hear you come in: I was thinking about *him*, and was not minding about anything else. I hope he can see us standing beside him—he would like that. He was very fond of you.'

'I know it, Michael, and it will always be a sad thought to me that I caused him some disappointment.'

'Don't think of that. He saw you passing the window, and his last words about you were very happy ones. If he had not——'

Michael could not complete the sentence—'if he had not looked at the will he would have died contented.' The thought that he had died in anger and disappointment arrested the man's tongue. He bowed his head as if looking at the hidden face, and relapsed into the trance from which he had been for a moment aroused.

‘You have given me good news,’ she said, placing her hand in his as she had often done in childhood. ‘You could not have told me anything more pleasant than that his last thoughts of me were kindly ones, for I have been wretched thinking of how I deceived him—— You are not well, Michael!’

He had drawn such a quick breath, like a sob, when she uttered the words ‘deceived him,’ that she could not help observing it.

‘I shall be better by and by,’ he answered in an undertone, and without lifting his head.

‘Not so long as you stay here brooding over our loss. Do come down-stairs with me.’

The tender tone and the touch of her hand resting in his quickened his dulled senses. Suddenly his hand closed on hers; he looked into her clear eyes with all the old yearning but none of the hope, and a startled flush suffused her cheeks.

‘Do you know what you are doing when you

• speak that way, Polly? You are reviving hopes which were as dear to him almost as to myself. You are tempting me to tell you things which I desired that you should never know. Give me peace—do not tempt me to say any more, for it was I who deceived him, not you; and all the shame and guilt of doing so press on me very heavily now that I can make no atonement to him.'

He had broken down: the passion of grief which he had hitherto succeeded in hiding from others' eyes found vent at last; and although he spoke in a low, tremulous voice, there was a ring in it like a cry of despair.

She was frightened and bewildered with still only a vague sense of the source of all this anguish, and so, timidly:

'Tell me, Michael, what I can do?'

'There is nothing you can do now, Polly. I told you that before. You have made your choice; I hope you will be happy, and I would

like to help to make you happy. You know what ~~he~~ wished, and we know that it can never be realised.'

'I do not know that.'

He stared at her in amazement, and then a light seemed to flash upon him.

'You are very good, Polly; but at this moment we are both excited, and your good-nature is ready to promise more than your love could fulfil. We are still in his presence: let me relieve you at once. Even if you were now ready to obey his wishes, I should feel bound to say that I cannot accept the sacrifice.'

'What if it be no sacrifice?' And the flush deepened on her cheeks, whilst her eyes rested upon him with the timid, trustful look of a fawn.

There was agony in the man's face; he made a quick movement as if about to take her in his arms; then, by a strong effort checking the impulse, he smiled sadly at his own folly.

'No, no, it is too late; even if you could give

me what I have been yearning for so long, to know it now would add more pain to what I have already to bear. It is too late. I am not worthy. I have deceived my father, and it was the discovery of my falsehood that killed him.'

'You are unjust to yourself, Michael,' she said quickly. 'We knew, and he knew, that he had not long to live—he told me so. Whatever you may have done to vex him, you are blaming yourself too much.'

It was sweet to hear her voice defending him against himself; it was like a cooling draught to one feverish and parched.

'I have tried hard to comfort myself by that thought. I knelt beside him and prayed to be forgiven, and then all the pitiful excuses that could be urged in my favour only showed me the more clearly that I had been prompted by selfishness and pride, and not by my love for you and for him, which I had consoled myself in thinking was the only motive of my conduct. God knows

I did believe at the time that I was doing right.'

'Then you are not doing right now, Michael, in torturing yourself by useless regrets.'

He instantly became calm. Throughout the conversation he had shown glimpses of emotion which he had again and again controlled; and his power over himself had been almost overthrown when she had suggested that she might marry him without any sacrifice. The remembrance of her driving away with Walton restored him. She was in her pity ready to say anything to give him relief; but having risked so much for her happiness, he would not endanger it by taking advantage of her present mood. Therefore, when she had almost offered herself, he turned away from the prize which his heart was yearning for. And now her tender reproach seemed to recall him from a cloud of bitter reflections.

'That is true, Polly; regrets are always useless; but you are the only one who has seen

me so low down as this, and I am not sorry, for it has been a relief to me to tell you my thoughts. It will explain to you anything queer in my ways which may have disturbed you, and you will not doubt that I shall do everything I can to fill his place in all that concerns you until—until you are married. We will go down-stairs now.'

The reference to the event which would terminate his service recalled the scene in the garden. She had said many bitter things to him then, and they were all the more bitter because they were uttered in the presence of his successful rival—for he had no doubt that Walton had been successful. Although she had not absolutely declared her decision in words, she had done so in acts which bore only the one construction—that she had accepted him. There was no petty anger in the man's heart, no jealousy even; for the combination of his evil stars seemed to him at this moment so overwhelming that he accepted

the position with the resignation which is born of despair. It was of no avail to continue the struggle ; he was beaten, and he must endure his defeat quietly. It did appear to him that he might even yet have won her hand if he could have been unscrupulous enough to take advantage of her pity. More than once the temptation had proved almost too much for him ; but he had resisted it.

The sudden change in his manner was more distressing to her than his morbid self-accusations ; these might be reasoned away, and she had fancied for a little while that her efforts to do so were succeeding. But the fancy was dispelled by this resumption of sad reserve, in which he seemed to hug his misery and to forbid anyone to interfere. The humour was beyond her comprehension, and apparently beyond the power of her affection to overcome.

She had followed him to the door ; but on the threshold she paused and impulsively

returned to take a last look at Uncle Job, who had grown so inexpressibly dearer to her now that he had passed away than he had ever seemed to be before. As she gazed at the cold face she silently prayed that his spirit would direct her how to accomplish that act of justice to his son which she knew he had called on her to perform.

Michael did not look back, and yet he understood all that was passing : her love for his father formed one of the strongest links in the chain which bound him to her, whilst it added another sharp sting to the knowledge that he had lost her.

When she came forth he closed the door and followed her down-stairs.

'We will go outside,' she said, like one half-suffocated and craving for fresh air.

Whithersoever she might lead he would follow. With eyes fixed straight before her she moved towards the bower. As she walked, and without

looking at him, she said in a subdued tone—he did not observe how nervous she was:

‘Are you quite sure, Michael, that you understood what I meant when you told me a few minutes ago that—that it was too late?’

‘Quite sure,’ he answered, with tremulous hesitation in his voice and a bewilderment of speculations in his brain. Before he could reduce the speculations to form she turned to him a clear, frank face in which he imagined there was an expression of relief.

‘So be it, Michael; and now that we quite understand each other there can no longer be any doubts or hesitation between us, such as there have been whilst it was uncertain what relations we were to hold to each other. Now I shall be able to speak to you as to a dear brother in whose judgment I trust and to whom I can give my full confidence. And you will speak to me in the same way, I hope—tell me when you think I am doing wrong, and scold me if



'She turned to him a clear, frank face.'



I am disobedient—just as Uncle Job used to do?’

‘I will try.’

He saw how pleased she was that there should be no more doubts as to their future relationship; the position being definitely settled, they would be at perfect ease in their intercourse, and he was glad that he had answered as he had done.

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